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Calling All the Sisters: The Impact of Sister Circles on the Retention and Experiences of Black Womyn Collegians at Predominately White Institutions

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CALLING ALL THE SISTERS: THE IMPACT OF SISTER CIRCLES ON THE
RETENTION AND EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMYN COLLEGIANS
AT PREDOMINATELY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Educational Leadership

by
Courtney Allen
May 2019

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

The experiences of Black womyn collegians (BWC) at predominately White campuses (PWC) is one of isolation, lack of support, and combating oppressive incidents regularly (Commodore, Baker, & Arroyo, 2018; Porter, 2013). Along with the challenges of being a BWC on campus and in society, there is lack of formal safe spaces for BWC to unpack and manage the weight of microaggressions and the chilly campus climate many of them endure at PWI (Croom, Beatty, Acker, & Butler, 2017; Porter & Dean, 2015; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). For BWC to develop, succeed, and persist at PWI, they need intentional support (Rosales & Person, 2003).

This case study examined how institutions create climates that nurture sister circles for BWC to develop, succeed, and persist at PWI. The purpose of this study was to examine one institution's sister circle program and its impact on the experiences of the BWC at the institution. The sister circle program at Hope State University was the selected research site for the case study. The data sources were interviews, sister circle general meeting observation, artifacts, and a questionnaire. The participants were 10 BWC (general and executive board members) involved in the sister circle program and four administrators directly connected to the program. Thematic analysis was utilized to make meaning of the experiences of the 10 BWC and four administrators within the sister circle program. The emergent themes were Spaces for Sisterhood, Sense of Belonging, Campus Agents, and Intentional Institutional Inclusion. The implications for practice and future research were discussed for BWC and sister circles, including the institutional responsibility PWIs have to the experiences of BWCs.

DEDICATION

We Black women are the single group in the West intact. And anybody can see we're pretty shaky. We are, however (all praises) the only group that derives its identity from itself.

—Nikki Giovanni

I dedicate this dissertation to all the Black womyn collegians at predominantly White institutions who feel isolated, lost, and silenced. I wrote this with you in mind because I was you many years ago, and I understand your pain, strength, and desire to break free! My hope is this dissertation will serve as a step in the right direction to positively impact the experiences of Black womyn collegians at predominantly White institutions. I ask current Black womyn collegians to stay strong and persist because there are so many of us rooting for you and working to dismantle the system so you can exist as your full, authentic selves. We have your back—keep pushing and spreading your Black girl magic all over campus!

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journey and know it was amazing and manageable because of you. You have taught me how to be a future faculty who cares and serves others, all while being an intentional mentor and bomb critical scholar. As a Black womyn scholar, I thank you for setting an exceptional example for me to follow as I become a faculty member. You will always be my chair, mentor, friend and ultimate example of Black girl magic!

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To my “Just Call Me Dr.” crew: Drs. Garrett, Hall, Howard, Kenney, and soon-to-be Lange, thank you for always being there to write, laugh, or cry with. Your friendship is priceless, and I would not have made it without all of you. I love you all dearly! To Dr. Fine, thank you for helping me when I first got to Clemson and throughout my process here! You are always ready to road trip, concert trip, and just be so positive, thank you for your friendship. To the soon-to-be Dr. Smith, you are amazing, and we bonded from the beginning! Thank you for your support and work in GSG and in general. I appreciate your drive and your work ethic, I cannot wait until you are an HBCU President! Byron,

thank you for just being you and bringing calmness and appreciation into my life. Your work ethic is unmatched, and you are so humble about all you have accomplished and have yet to do. Thanks so much for always reminding me to mediate and for always being the calm energy needed.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“Will I ever get tired of having to speak on behalf of Black womyn¹ students?”

This is the question I continually asked myself each year as another group of first-year undergraduate students arrived on campus at the predominately White institution (PWI) I attended. I wondered if the few Black womyn who chose to attend would have the same feeling of discomfort I experienced when I was met by the sea of White faces on campus. I wondered if they would feel singled out in class when topics of diversity came up since it was likely they would be the only person of color in the class or in their major.

When I think back to my undergraduate journey, these are all situations I encountered in college. As a Black womyn on campus, I had feelings of isolation, being singled out, my voice being suppressed, oppressed, or dismissed, or just being misunderstood. When I decided to attend a PWI, I assumed my college experience would be different and challenging as a student of color (SOC), but I did not expect the transition from high school to college would be so hard. From elementary to high school, I remained one of the few SOC. However, as I entered womynhood/college, my setting changed from New York City with the support of family to rural western Pennsylvania and alone, and I realized my capacity to manage tokenism and oppression had changed. In this new setting, I was forced to face oppression in a different way in a less racially diverse place and without the support of family. College was the first time I felt I was in a

¹ The significance of spelling womyn with the letter y represents the absence of needing a man to define a womyn.

fist fight with racism and oppression but did not have any boxing gloves or headgear to protect me.

As an undergraduate student, I did not always feel my institution provided programs or initiatives to support SOC, specifically for Black womyn. As Black students, we had to create for ourselves these informal gatherings/spaces to feel comfortable. As I reflect on my undergraduate experience, I along with other Black womyn students were instrumental in creating the programs and initiatives we felt were needed. These initiatives included creating a womyn's society named after the first Black womyn to graduate from our institution, chartering the first historically African American sorority chapter at the institution, and providing informal mentoring to many new Black students.

Although I am happy we were able to create these opportunities during college, as students we should not have been the sole pioneers for these types of programs. This responsibility was the university's, and it should have already established or at least been in the process of creating these opportunities for SOC, especially given Black womyn were the largest SOC population (College Board, 2018). The enrollment of Black womyn collegians (BWC) in higher education increases each year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), and the support for them should match the change of enrollment. At many institutions, when enrollment increases more residence halls tend to be built, and the same value should be placed on the support for BWC at PWI.

The institution I attended was similar to other PWI in that it did not provide additional resources or services for SOC. Though many PWI have a variety of support

services for the entire student population, these services are not inclusive of BWC (Rosales & Person, 2003). Most student organizations are open to all students; however, at PWI the student leaders in executive positions in organizations tend to be all White students, and within Greek life, the organizations at PWI are majority historically White sororities and fraternities (Rosales & Person, 2003). The support services landscape for SOC and BWC is left without any culturally relevant student support options (Miller, 2017; Rosales & Person, 2003).

Black womyn collegians need additional support while in college and more importantly at a PWI because they experience racial microaggressions, isolation, and less support to succeed (Commodore, Baker, & Arroyo, 2018; Croom, Beatty, Acker, & Butler, 2017; Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunt, 2013). The lack of support for BWC and unwelcomed fit within the fabric of campus (academically or socially) is one of the causes of low retention rates at PWI (Watkins et al., 2007; Young, Johnson, Hawthorne, & Pugh, 2011), but I desire to change that with my research. The informal and formal programs I helped create at my institution contributed to my decision to stay and persist, but not all BWC may feel empowered to do so. The additional support programs my sorority sister and I created provided the comfort and experiences I needed to survive and in turn thrive at my PWI. Emotional and physical spaces, known as counter-spaces (academic or social), are areas in which SOC can unpack and overcome the negative campus environment (Yosso & Lopez, 2010). The simple yet complex solution for PWI to retain BWC is to implement additional support services beyond the ones offered to all students. Nurturing counter-spaces at PWI will signal to BWC that

they, as Black womyn, are valued and that their institution wants them to succeed and graduate.

The same question I pondered almost nine years ago as a Black undergraduate womyn at a PWI mirrors the state of the Black womyn in society. They have been mistreated, misunderstood, dismissed, and devalued by society, and Black womyn have something to say about it. Scholars in higher education must understand the current state and treatment of the Black womyn in the larger society because such experiences undergird and mirror those of BWC. I share examples of the current societal treatment of Black womyn next.

What does it mean to be a Black womyn in America? Cooper (2018) explained, “When it comes to Black women, sometimes Americans don’t recognize that sass is simply a more palatable form of rage” (p. 1). The term “sassy” has a tormented relationship with the Black womyn because it embodies something hot or spicy that is dangerous or unbearable. The Black womyn is neither dangerous nor unbearable, but in America, this is the narrative forced upon the Black womyn (Carson, 2018; Collins, 2012). Beyond the label of “sassy,” Black womyn constantly must prove their ability to physically and emotionally function daily in society. Lolade Siyonbola, a Yale graduate student, understands this notion all too well. As Caron (2018) noted, on May 19, 2018, Siyonbola was napping in her residence hall communal lounge when a White womyn student called the police reporting an unknown person in the common lounge. Once the police arrived, Siyonbola was asked to verify that she “belonged here,” the words used by the police, at which time she opened her room door. She also had to produce her ID, and

a frustrated Siynobola stated, “I am not going to justify my existence here.” Her words ring true for many Black womyn fatigued by having to prove their existence. For a Black womyn in America, being labeled sassy or angry or being told that she does not belong is the norm. All of these labels are negative and demeaning to who the Black womyn is to herself and how she is seen in society; the central question that surfaces is: Why does society harbor these varying yet negative narratives of the Black womyn? Collins (2002) attributes the narrative of the Black womyn in America to slavery and “the social constructed” ideology of the Black womyn in an effort to uphold the oppression of Black womyn (p. 72). This type of oppression Black womyn experience appears in all parts of society, especially when they attend college (Collins, 2012; hooks, 1989; Commodore et al., 2018).

A similar type of oppression and negative image of Black womyn within society manifests in higher education with the treatment of BWC (Commodore et al., 2018; hooks, 1989; Lewis et al., 2013; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). The current literature about BWC speaks to their complex and challenging experiences in college, particularly at PWI, connected to student involvement, engagement, success and identity development (Commodore et al., 2018; Croom et al., 2017; Dortch & Patel, 2017; Miller, 2017; Porter & Dean, 2015).

However, the literature and studies about BWC have not dissected the role PWI play in upholding the ill narrative and treatment of BWC. Additionally, within the literature there has not been a discussion on the responsibility PWI have to create climates that nurture counter-spaces to develop, retain, and improve the experiences of

BWC. Counter-spaces such as sister circles allow opportunities for BWC to become self-defined Black womyn. A sister circle is a welcoming physical and emotional coping space that allows Black womyn to unpack and manage the oppressive societal situations they encounter (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). Lorde (2012) explained that “the development of self-defined Black women, ready to explore and pursue our power and interest within our communities, is a vital component in the war for Black liberation” (pp. 45-46). Counter-spaces can help the Black womyn to become self-defined and not allow for societal narratives to define who she is. Counter spaces aid BWC in defining themselves, succeeding, and thriving, and most importantly, they help to retain them. This study has shown the importance of sister circles and the impact they can have on improving the experience of BWC at PWI and shifting the narrative of Black womyn in society.

Significance of the Study

This study was essential for five reasons. First, it fostered a greater awareness of BWC experiences at PWI as it relates to their treatment and how this treatment impacts retention at PWI. Much of the literature about BWC has spoken to their experience at PWI but has not always connected the impact it has on their retention. Second, this study questioned and challenged PWI to examine and change the treatment and trajectory of BWC. The story from the literature on BWC has deemed that there is limited or no conversation about the institutional responsibility of PWI to BWC and improving their experience.

Third, historically much of the literature about Black students has focused mainly on helping Black men succeed (Harper, 2009; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). The value in

this study is the focus on BWC experience at PWI through an institutional responsibility lens and the impact on retention.

Fourth, this study was essential because it can be utilized throughout higher education (i.e., student affairs, academic success, admissions, etc.) to challenge and change the current system BWC have functioned within and underneath. This study helped explain how vital sister circles are to the BWC experience and overall impact on the institutional culture at PWI.

Last, this study extended knowledge about the experience of Black undergraduate womyn and developed new knowledge about Black graduate womyn's experiences and sister circles for BWC. The hope is within this study, conversations with and the literature about BWC have moved the narrative of the Black womyn from the margins to the forefront of societal concerns and higher education.

Statement of the Problem

It doesn't take much but a glimpse of the news or scrolling on Twitter to reflect the numerous narratives about Black womyn. Black Girl Magic or Black Girls Rock! speak to a positive reflection of Black womyn. All these phrases are true; however, there is another part to this narrative that is not always discussed— Black womyn are not fine and need support on many levels. Despite BWC's high graduation rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), PWI are not retaining this population (Grier-Reed, Arcinue, & Inman, 2016; Rodgers & Summers, 2008). From this problem stems three pressing issues facing BWC retention at PWI.

First, the issue pointed to the dominant White supremacy ideological view of Black womyn (Collins, 2002; hooks 1989). The negative treatment of Black womyn traces back to slavery in which Black womyn were used as cooks and wet nurses and made to produce babies to work on the plantation (Jones, 2009). The symbolic physical and emotional labor forced upon the bodies of Black womyn stems from slavery and has continued to the present day. This boxed-in view of Black womyn within society is not stagnant, as it permeates within higher education through its practices and policies toward BWC (Cooper, 2018; Mosley, 1980).

The second issue is focused on institutional leaders, who assume because of the high graduation and enrollment rates of BWC (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), BWC do not need additional support on campus. Therefore, their practices and policies completely dismiss BWC's needs or experiences at PWI. Much of the research about Black students in higher education is concentrated on Black men and helping them achieve success (Harper, 2009; Harper & Quaye, 2007), leaving BWC to support and empower themselves.

The final issue explored the lack of action taken by PWI to help BWC when they vocalize their experiences of isolation, microaggressions, and marginalization on campus. The daily battle BWC face on campus pushes them to leave college or suffer in silence. Regardless, the absence of action leads to low retention rates of BWC. This burden should not be left to BWC to fix; rather, institutions need to create climates that nurture counter-spaces (i.e., sister circles) to help BWC graduate and succeed.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined how institutions—particularly PWI—create climates that nurture counter-spaces (i.e., sister circles) for BWC to develop, succeed, and persist. Institutions have a responsibility to provide and create spaces on campus and within higher education for *all* students to succeed and grow (Lau, 2003). From an equity standpoint, this means providing BWC with different forms of support with the understanding that the services offered just for BWC are intentionally nurtured for them to develop and succeed. A focal point of interest within this study was unpacking the institutional responsibility PWI have to improve the experience of BWC and examining the way in which these actions occur and when they do not. This study examined the experiences of BWC at PWI and the need for spaces such as sister circles to provide the tools to develop and succeed during and after college. The hope was this study would create a model for other institutions to implement sister circles for BWC on their campuses to positively impact the retention of BWC. With rich and detailed pictures of programs or centers providing support and services for BWC, more institutions can visualize possible and attainable ways to serve BWC at PWI. In addition to filling the gap within literature dedicated to undergraduate Black womyn, this study also added to the literature about graduate Black womyn experiences, as this subpopulation remains under-researched. I intended for the recommendations of my study to be transferable so others in higher education who work with and impact the experience of BWC can use my work to change and improve the experience of BWC through counter-spaces. Thus, I asked the

following research question: *How do institutions create climates that nurture sister circles for Black womyn collegians to develop, succeed, and persist at PWI?*

Research Design Summary

When selecting a research design for this study, case study proved to be the most fitting choice because similar to other forms of qualitative research, case study centers on the “search for meaning and understanding” (Merriam, 2009). Case study research allows for a deep description and various perspectives of a specific project, institution, or system to provide an authentic understanding of it (Thomas, 2016). Yin (2014) declared, “A case study allows investigators to focus on a ‘case’ and retain a holistic and real-world perspective” (p. 4). The case study bounds the topic, and within this bounded system, it allows for the researcher to clearly identify what phenomenon is being researched. A bounded system is essentially answering what the phenomenon is. In addition to examining the bounded system, within the case are the units of analysis that allow the researcher to analyze elements of the bounded system. Case study methodology allowed me to focus on a particular sister circle program (the case) and how it functioned at one institution. Analysis of one sister circle program as a case helped me to understand the experiences of BWC in the program and its impact on students’ persistence.

Limitations

Within this study, I aimed to examine the impact counter-spaces such as sister circles have on the experiences and persistence of BWC at PWI. An important aspect of this study was transferability, and with a “rich thick description” of the setting, participants and details of the findings allow other researchers to utilize my study for

future research (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, replication of this study at another PWI and with other BWC should be done with caution. I conducted this study at a public research institution in the Midwest with a documented commitment to diversity with intentional counter-spaces for BWC. Providing a limitation for this study was difficult, as the study was meant to solely examine one sister circle program at one institution which gave a singular and specific narrative of the BWC and administrators at that institution.

Delimitations

This study examined the impact counter-spaces such as sister circles have on the experiences and retention of BWC at PWI. The research site, participants, and setting were purposive as the researcher's aim was to conduct the study at an institution with an established sister circle program. Other institutions were eliminated from the selection process if there was no intentional diversity strategy/initiatives, no counter-spaces for students of color, and a low population (less than 2%) of African American students. Without having the aforementioned criteria, I would not have been able to conduct the study because the selection criteria informed its research design.

Definition of Terms

- **Black:** A person who identifies as being of African American, African, or West Indian descent.
- **Black feminist thought (BFT):** A theoretical framework that helps Black womyn to explain their experiences related to their identity. It highlights the layered oppression of Black womyn, especially centered around their voice and thoughts (Collins, 2002).

- **Black womyn collegians (BWC):** A Black womyn undergraduate or graduate college student.
- **Counter-spaces:** Emotional and physical space that can be academic or social for students of color to unpack and overcome the negative campus environment (Yosso & Lopez, 2010).
- **Microaggression:** Demeaning verbal or nonverbal commentary directed toward people of color whether intentional or unintentional (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).
- **Oppression:** The unfair treatment of one group over another, in which the dominant group denies access to social and financial resources in society (Collins, 2002).
- **Predominately White institution (PWI):** A college or university in higher education that is historically founded for the education of White students, and a majority of its student population, faculty, and administrators are White (Rodgers & Summers, 2008).
- **Persistence:** The ability to manage, navigate, and exist through difficult and challenging environments and situations (Barker & Avery, 2012).
- **Retention:** The outcome when an undergraduate or graduate student academically enrolls in a college/university and completes all required courses continually to graduation without dropping out (Hagedorn, 2005).
- **Sister circle:** A form of a counterspace, a coping space that allows for a Black womyn to unpack and manage the constant oppressive societal situations she

encounters. This safe space allows for her to be unapologetically herself without boundaries and helps her to meet other Black womyn with similar or varying experiences. The end result of the sister circle experience is she can shed feelings of isolation, aggression, etc., feel whole again, and be able to battle the systems of oppression once again (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011).

- **Womyn:** An alternate spelling of woman/women to identify a person of the female gender. The significance of spelling womyn with the letter “y” represents the absence of needing a man to define a womyn (Hauser, 2005).

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 provided an introduction for the reader about the experience of the Black womyn and BWC at PWI in higher education and in society. The statement of the problem is the low retention of BWC at PWI. The purpose of this study was to examine how PWI create climates that nurture sister circles for BWC to develop, succeed, and persist.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of this study was to highlight how institutions should create nurturing campus climates and counter-spaces such as sister circles, which allow for Black womyn collegians (BWC) to develop, succeed, and persist to completion at predominantly White institutions (PWI). Institutions have a responsibility to provide and create spaces on campus and within higher education for *all* students to succeed and grow (Lau, 2003). This type of support is provided in higher education on many campuses, but BWC are a population that has not benefited due to the lack of institutional support (Rosales & Person, 2003). This study examined the experiences of BWC at PWI and the need for counter-spaces such as sister circles to provide the tools to develop and succeed. Ultimately, I believe sister circles are part of the key to BWC retention at PWI.

In this chapter, I review the literature related to the study. The discussion of literature is separated into five sections: (a) BWC experiences in higher education, (b) experiences of BWC at PWI, (c) retention of BWC, (d) sister circles, and (e) theoretical framework: Black feminist thought.

Black Womyn Experiences in Higher Education

Historically, PWI have not been accepting of Black womyn as faculty, staff, and students as it relates to their physical or intellectual presence (Collins, 2002; hooks, 1989; Solomon, 1985). This lack of acceptance and understanding of Black womyn translates into the belief that Black womyn are not intelligent and/or not valued in higher education (Glover, 2012; Mosley, 1980). The treatment of Black womyn in higher education is

similar whether they are in the role of administrator, faculty, or student: The feeling of isolation, tokenism, outsiders-within, and invisibility is always present (hooks, 1989; Mosely, 1980; West, 2017).

The experiences of BWC are connected to the history of all Black womyn's experiences in the academy, and this includes administrators, faculty, and staff who are typically supporting and mentoring BWC at PWI. There is an important relationship between the experiences of the Black womyn administrators and faculty who serve as support systems for BWC in higher education because without these warriors, BWC could not survive. The role Black womyn administrators play in connection to BWC is vital to understand because these womyn help BWC manage and navigate academia, PWI, and society during their time in college (Kelly, Segoshi, Adams, & Raines, 2017).

Much of the literature about Black womyn administrators in higher education provides a similar narrative to the overall lack of support and feeling of isolation and invisibility. Mosely (1980) investigated the experiences of Black womyn administrators in higher education and aimed to identify the barriers and challenges they faced. The study provided 120 participants with a questionnaire that gathered information in the following areas: personal and status information, institutional information, and personal attitudes and opinions. The data from this study found Black womyn administrators felt isolation and loneliness due to how their colleagues treated them. White womyn and men treated them better than Black men, as Black womyn administrators felt Black men administrators left them behind. Mosely (1980) coined the term for this treatment "the Black-to-Black dilemma" (p. 304). Black womyn administrators also attributed their

barrier of advancement within the institution to “societal institutional racism” (p. 305). From this study, the status of the Black womyn administrators’ experience is viewed as “invisible beings” (p. 306), which connects to the societal narrative of Black womyn.

The conclusions and recommendations provided by Mosely were for White institutions to review their policies and practices to ensure they assessed the needs of and helped Black womyn. The ending recommendation presented was not for institutions but for Black womyn. Mosely (1980) spoke to Black womyn with a personal call: “Black women need each other. They need Black women to write about Black women” (p. 309). This study provided a glimpse into the experience of Black womyn administrators and highlighted barriers and other reasons for their treatment in higher education. Along with challenging PWI to review their policies and practices that impact the needs of Black womyn, the researcher encouraged Black womyn to write about themselves to help fill the gap in the literature about them. In a sense, the researcher expressed to Black womyn to take power into their own hands, to essentially create their own destiny and re-write their own story. It is important and necessary for Black womyn and especially Black womyn administrators to continue to create their own path in higher education; when they do speak up or resist the unbalanced systematic structure, they are generally outnumbered and labeled as aggressive for challenging the flawed system in which they have to function. The parallels from the experiences of Black womyn administrators in this study to BWC are a sense of isolation, lack of connection to Black men, and the impact of institutional racism on their ability to succeed.

The idea of having to function within a flawed system seems unfair and at best counterproductive. For Black womyn administrators, the treatment they encounter in PWI materializes through racial and gendered microaggressions, which can be overt but tend to be subtle in delivery. Racial microaggressions are an insult targeted toward a person or community of color solely focused on the racial identities they hold (Sue, 2010). Black womyn in higher education can be subjected to racial microaggressions on a daily basis, which can be taxing on them physically, mentally, and emotionally (Henry, 2010; Mosley, 1980; Patitu & Hinton, 2003). The sense of isolation felt by Black womyn in the academy can be multi-layered because the isolation can be felt physically and mentally. At PWI, the number of Black womyn administrators and faculty represents a small amount of the population, and this lack of physical and intellectual representation of other Black womyn or people of color can feel lonely (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). Another aspect of isolation can be the few Black womyn within the institution may not connect or be collegial and may view other Black womyn as a threat (Mosley, 1980). The feeling of being voiceless as a Black womyn in the academy manifests in many ways such as Black womyn not wanting to enter the academy and experiencing burn out and racial battle fatigue (Danley & Green, 2004; Gregory, 2001; Meyers, 2002).

Although Black womyn administrators face microaggressions daily and have to navigate the system, nevertheless they persist because they want to mentor and help other Black womyn following in their footsteps. Bright (2010) explored the lives and experiences of Black womyn in senior-level administrator positions and how they experienced leading in traditional White community colleges. The guiding research

question(s) of the study were: (a) How do Black womyn senior-level administrators experience leading in traditionally White community colleges? and (b) What are their challenges and supports? Bright utilized a phenomenological paradigm of inquiry because qualitative methodology is the standard for studying human experiences and phenomenology to make meaning of the lived experience of participants. Therefore, the womyn in this study could illustrate their personal story and give voice to a marginalized and generally ignored group. Bright utilized bi-cultural life structure as the conceptual framework for the in-depth semi-structured interviews with 14 Black womyn administrators.

Within the findings of this study, seven themes emerged: (a) pioneering women: the first, the only, and the lonely; (b) presidential aspirations; (c) struggle for legitimacy; (d) dealing with the -isms; (e) detractors; (f) Sustainers; and (g) negotiating biculturality. The implications from this research for Black womyn senior-level administrators implied there is a need for formal leadership training and mentoring programs for these womyn to succeed. The Black womyn administrators in this study experienced not only loneliness and struggle for legitimacy but also aspirations to overcome and succeed. The implications highlighted the need for leadership training and support in the form of mentoring for these womyn to succeed, which speaks to the need for counter-spaces and change in institutional campus racial climate. Within this study and the literature, the link for Black womyn administrators and BWC centers on the significance of counter-spaces and an examination of institutional campus racial climate to improve their narrative in the academy.

The literature illustrated that Black womyn administrators experience a mountain of oppression and battle to prove and explain their existence in the space of higher education, especially PWI (Patitu & Hinton, 2003). If the experience of the Black womyn administrator at a PWI is weighed down by racial battle fatigue and daily challenges, one could assume BWC's footsteps into higher education would mirror that of Black womyn administrators.

Experiences of Black Womyn Collegians at Predominantly White Institutions

There is a critical need to pay attention to the experiences of BWC because they are enrolling and graduating college at high rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), yet the literature on BWC and their experiential tales illustrates a different story that points to isolation, lack of sense of belonging, and not thriving (Commodore et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2013; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Within this section, the literature about the experiences of undergraduate and graduate Black womyn students is explored to show the continued challenges they face and what scholars see as the steps needed to change the current narrative of BWC in higher education.

The undergraduate Black womyn (UBW) attending a PWI has a mixture of emotions and experiences when they step on campus for the first time, but the feelings of isolation, being an outsider, and tokenism are all themes that appear and have a lasting impact during college and after their experience (Hannon, Woodside, Pollard, & Roman, 2016). For UBW on campus at a PWI, there are daily struggles that occur inside and outside of the classroom, ranging from encountering microaggressions to your voice or

presence not being valued or even heard. Jackson (1998) spoke to the daily struggle and authentic experience of being a UBW at a PWI: “being oppressed, working harder than others to be successful, constantly having to prove self to others, not being able to complain, fighting negative stereotypes, and fighting battles against racism and discrimination” (p. 177). At their foundation, PWI were not created with Black womyn in mind, and it is imperative to consistently push against the barriers of exclusion that keep Black womyn out of the spaces that can create change (Commodore et al., 2018). Despite UBW having these experiences in college, the graduation rates for BWC are high (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Therefore, statics illustrate that BWC are graduating at high rates, yet they still feel non-existent at PWI (Commodore et al., 2018). It is important to understand through research the unique experiences of BWC related to their development and success (Commodore et al., 2018). For BWC attending PWI, the ability to understand and dissect their identity is not always welcomed, and they are not generally provided a space to do so. However, understanding and the development of their identity is critical at a PWI to know the type of support they need to succeed and persist in college.

The literature connecting the dots between the problems BWC face at PWI centers on the monolithic view of BWC, microaggressions experienced at PWI, their success or lack of success, their voice being silenced inside and outside of the classroom, no sense of belonging academically and socially, and the need for counter-spaces as a form of support. These aspects of the BWC experience at PWI have been covered in the

literature, and scholars are still in the trenches using what is known from the literature to help BWC develop, succeed, and persist to completion at PWI.

Monolithic Image of Black Womyn Collegians

Within the literature about the experiences of UBW, the Black womyn is viewed as a monolithic being at PWI, which contributes to many of the challenges they face. For many BWC, having to speak for or represent the experience of all Black people is a constant frustration and misrepresentation placed upon BWC (Commodore et al., 2018; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). These encounters occur regularly in a classroom setting with faculty and students and are even more frequent if a BWC is the only person of color in the class. Commodore, Baker, and Arroyo (2018) explained, “In the classroom, negative stereotypes can stifle the Black woman’s willingness to engage in robust debates or exchanges of ideas out of concern that she will be viewed as angry or domineering” (p. 34). The additional challenge that contributes to the monolithic view/image of BWC is lack of literature that discusses Black womyn solely rather than Black students as a group. Although BWC hold the identities of being Black and a womyn, beyond those two identities they are different in many ways and should not be boxed into one image of a Black womyn.

Microaggressions

Sue (2010) summarized microaggressions as subtle insults directed at people of color and noted, “These insults and indignities are so pervasive that they are often unrecognized” (p. 7). Encounters with microaggressions can occur daily for UBW, whether in class or in general settings. This constant routine of being subjected to racial

insults whether subtle or overt can be taxing on the UBW and creates an unwelcoming, hostile environment for them. The literature on UBW's experiences related to microaggressions has explained the negative and lasting impact (Commodore et al., 2018; Croom et al., 2017; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Vaccaro's (2017) qualitative study examined Women of Color (WOC) at predominantly White women's colleges and counter-narratives about racial microaggressions that push through the dominant ideologies of colorblindness, meritocracy, and equal opportunity in education. Within this case study, through feminist focus groups that empowered womyn to express their stories in an effort toward social change, the Black womyn spoke candidly about their experiences (Ropers-Huilman & Winters, 2011).

In the findings, WOC explained how the concept of colorblindness was put at the forefront of how predominantly White women's colleges function. Some of the WOC within the study explained how predominantly White women's colleges projected on the environment the standard of all womyn being treated the same and not having their other identities acknowledged, expressing that all womyn have the same experiences. Another WOC shared an experience in class when she was faced with a microaggression and how the faculty member did not address the incident and downplayed the insult. This study provided an understanding of the experiences of WOC at predominantly White women's colleges, which pushes back on the narrative that these institutions are welcoming to all womyn. Creating an environment that treats all womyn the same dismisses challenging experiences of WOC. Similar to PWI, predominantly White women's colleges attempt to function in the mindset of supporting all students but do not acknowledge the need for

tailored support. For students who hold different identities, this mindset can create an atmosphere where students of color and especially Black womyn continue to not feel supported at PWI.

Success

The literature about the experiences of UBW connected to success tends to focus on their barriers to success (Miller, 2017), defining the most significant marker of success as graduating. However, for the UBW reaching graduation is only one form of success because personal development and involvement also serve as other measures of success for them while in college.

Miller's (2017) study highlighted the factors that aid BWC to succeed. Success was defined by what BWC learned through personal development, general education, intellectual skills, science and technology, and vocational preparation of all elements from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ). The social integration aspect of the experience is critical to understand because for African American students, connecting at PWI occurs differently and better within culturally linked organizations (Guiffrida, 2003). The study found positive correlations between BWC's intellectual skills and personal development, which means BWC have a desire to learn and interact with others different from themselves inside and outside of the classroom. Miller argued that since there was a positive correlation between social integration and student involvement, it would be in the best interest of higher education institutions to make BWC a focal point of student involvement programs and initiatives.

Miller's (2017) study helped to expand the understanding of the different elements that contribute to the success of BWC at PWI. Gaining more insight and knowledge around the social integration, development, and involvement of BWC inside and outside of the classroom is needed because then they can be intentionally supported. Commodore et al. (2018) stated, "Black women appear to be surviving, but we are not quite sure they are thriving" (p. 21). Black womyn collegians should not just survive but be able to intentionally thrive, and this can only occur when purposeful opportunities are provided for them. However, the study did not reflect the population of students beyond the first year, thus it did not provide a holistic representation of BWC beyond the freshmen experience. The limitation of only gaining the perspective of freshmen is challenging because understanding the experiences of all BWC of all class statuses provides for richer data and gains a diverse outlook as BWC progress in college. Since the study was quantitative, the "how" and "why" were not answered; utilizing qualitative methods would allow the ability to understand how and why there was a positive correlation between social integration and student involvement for BWC.

Winkle-Wagner's (2015) integrative, interdisciplinary review focused on literature contributing to the role individual characteristics and backgrounds, relationships, and institutional support structures have played in Black womyn's college success. The findings from this review highlighted that the use of the "one-size-fits-all" measure of success is not helpful because it can stifle the ability for BWC to define success differently and in their own way. Winkle-Wagner (2015) encouraged more within-group understanding of experiences, such as examining socioeconomic status,

first-generation status, and background, which could provide variation in tackling how to support BWC in succeeding. The researcher argued that future research from this review should include quantitative and mixed methods studies to be able to provide generalizations for helping support BWC. This review is essential for researchers focused on improving the experiences of BWC because the interdisciplinary examination of the topic and literature allows for a thorough and expansive look at how to help support BWC from different vantage points.

Voices Being Silenced

The essence of who a Black womyn is comprised of her physical and emotional being and, most importantly, her voice, which within her community is seen a source of strength (Collins, 1989, 2002; hooks, 1989). However, this same essence of who she morphs into is a different and negative narrative in society; the Black womyn is seen as threatening and most times invisible (Collins, 2002; Cooper, 2018; hooks, 1989). The value of her voice and speech in society can be cherished, feared, mocked, challenged, culturally appropriated, and silenced (Cooper, 2018; Cooper, Morris, & Boylorn, 2017). The concept of one narrative spanning on both the positive and negative spectrum is puzzling, but it is the reality for the Black womyn and especially for the UBW at a PWI (Commodore et al., 2018; Cooper, 2018). As hooks (1989) noted, speech is a space of healing, and for Black womyn, our voice and speech is our power, but many times this form of power is constantly squelched because of the need for society to maintain social inequalities and norms (Collins, 2002).

The literature discussing the voice of UBW focuses on how their voice has been silenced and their journey to find their voice within the systematic oppressive climate at PWI (O'Connor, 2002). Finding your voice can seem like a distant concept for Black womyn, especially in society when silencing Black womyn is considered the norm (Collins, 2002), and UBW face the same type of feeling silenced at PWI (Commodore et al., 2018). Kelly, Segoshi, Adams, and Raines (2017) conducted a study sharing the experiences of 16 Black alumnae attending a PWI and found their placement as “other” within the campus environment was a result of “interlocking systems of oppression—[it] hindered their ability to engage and silenced their voices as Black women knowers in the classroom” (p. 172). The presence of a Black womyn in the classroom changes the environment, especially an environment that is not prepared to hear or support her (Commodore et al., 2018; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Commodore et al. (2018) noted, “There often exists a forced homogeneity for a Black woman in college: a socially constructed idea of how she should dress and act in addition to the color of her skin and the state of her hair” (p. 34). The UBW’s voice and being should be met with value and openness, but currently, this is not what is actually happening for Black womyn.

Sense of Belonging

The PWI campus for a BWC can feel like storm, much like Dorothy felt in the *Wiz*, dazed and confused. Even more confusing can be navigating the academic experience at a PWI, which can be a difficult place for a BWC to explore her identity, make meaning of it, and feel a sense of belonging (Porter, 2015; Porter & Dean, 2015). Commodore et al. (2018) described the classroom experience of the Black womyn: “In

the classroom, negative stereotypes can stifle the Black women's willingness to engage in robust debates or exchanges of ideas out of concern that she will be viewed as angry or domineering" (p. 34). The classroom experience for Black womyn can vary by major, and UBW in the sciences have voiced a deeper challenge in functioning in the classroom (Dortch & Patel, 2017; Gayles & Ampaw, 2016).

Dortch and Patel's (2017) study focused on the impact of microaggressions on the sense of belonging for UBW STEM students inside and outside of the classroom at PWI. The UBW STEM majors in the study explained feeling a sense of isolation being the only Black womyn in the department and not having faculty members of color either. Outside of the classroom, the UBW STEM majors felt isolation and the feeling of otherness by Black men on campus, who did not support them. The findings pointed to Black womyn feeling that marginalization from Black men, White women, and White men can be the stimulus fueling the lack of sense of belonging and the success of Black womyn.

Dortch and Patel (2017) presented implications for practice centering on the importance of addressing racial and gendered microaggressions that occur regularly in addition to a campus climate in which microaggressions are entrenched. The last implication was for PWI to institutionalize support systems for Women of Color similar to learning communities that focus on meeting the needs Black womyn in the sciences. No matter what major BWC select at a PWI, there is the chance that they may feel a sunken level of isolation and lack of belonging in the classroom, which can be damaging and push them further away from the institution and success in college.

Need for Counter Spaces

The literature focused on the need for counter-spaces for BWC has been growing, and its message has connected the need for counter-spaces to success and improved experience for BWC at PWI. Porter's (2013) grounded study examined how Black undergraduate women enrolled at PWI developed their identity as Black women. The study focused on topics related to Black undergraduate women's development of identity at PWI and how Black women navigate through the challenges of attending a PWI. The theoretical framework used in this study was symbolic interactionism and Black feminist thought, which helped to examine notions of self and explanations of social interactions. The findings of the study highlighted that there is a need for support for Black women on campus. The participants shared the importance of supportive environments, and the office of multicultural affairs was mentioned as being vital to the womyn's experience. Their group of friends was seen as one of the main reasons BWC were thriving in college. One of the last things the womyn revealed was the want to be supported by a Black woman role model or mentor for encouragement and guidance. This study provided a great foundation for understanding Black undergraduate womyn and their identity development at PWI. The womyn in the study gave the voice for BWC to explain what they felt and what they needed at a PWI. The overwhelming response from the Black womyn in the study is the need for additional support, which connects to the importance of counter-spaces such as sister circles at PWI.

The experiences of BWC at PWI can be challenging because they face isolation, lack of belonging, and microaggressions on a regular basis, which makes their student

experience very taxing (Miller, 2017; Winkle-Wagner, 2008). Although BWC encounter a difficult campus climate at PWI, they still attempt to persist by creating informal groups with other BWC as a way to cope with the negative experience (Lewis et al., 2013; Miller, 2017). It is quite admirable that BWC find ways to cope and persist even within a campus climate that is at times hostile; however, BWC should not have to create coping or counter-spaces themselves. It is the responsibility of the institution to create spaces for them to thrive (Croom et al., 2017; Lau, 2013; Lewis et al., 2013).

Within the literature about the experiences of UBW, there are four areas of focus that are missing. First, there still needs to be a discussion of the social integration and student involvement experiences of Black college womyn at PWI (Miller 2017). Second, the complex road to success of BWC, explaining the challenges and how they persist on their path to success, is missing from the literature. Third, the effects of microaggressions on Black undergraduate womyn's sense of belonging in science need to be discussed (Dortch & Patel, 2017). Last, the college success of Black womyn is under-researched due to most studies looking at groups of students of color collectively (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). The literature about BWC, especially UBW, still needs to be expanded. It is exciting to see the experiences of BWC within the literature, but there still needs to be a constant push to have BWC experiences at the forefront of the conversation in higher education.

Retention of Black Womyn Collegians

The reason students decide to attend and stay in college can vary, but connection and engagement to the institution are contributing factors (Green et al., 2018; O'Connor, 2002;

Schwartz, Bower, Rice & Washington, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). However, academic success tends to be one of the main factors in retention issues faced by institutions (Andrews & Schulze, 2018). Andrews and Schulze (2018) noted,

Within the context of greater access, colleges and universities need to develop new approaches and strategies to facilitate the academic progress of students with varying levels of competence in both content knowledge and skills needed to be successful in college. (p. 45)

There is not one answer to improve the retention of students in college, but a multi-layered approach that involves holistic (academic, social, emotional) support to help students succeed and graduate from college is necessary.

Within this discussion about retention, the literature on SOC's and especially BWC in this topic area is lacking. However, of the literature that does exist, for BWC some of the contributing factors to low retention points to negative experiences socially and academic at PWI (Kelly et al., 2017; Miller, 2017; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). The trends connected to BWC enrollment and completion leads one to believe there are unspoken and missed factors that play a part in the challenges BWC encounter at PWI that hinder their ability to succeed and thrive (Commodore et al., 2018). McClain and Perry (2017) attributed campus racial climate as another overarching factor that impacts retention, especially for SOC's.

Campus Racial Climate

Every institution has a culture that is specific and unique, and there can be positive and negative elements of culture. However, it is important to understand the impact of the culture within the institution and whether its unique culture is pushing the

institution toward growth or keeping it static. One of the ways to better understand the culture of an institution is tapping into the campus racial climate, which examines campus and community climate in an effort “to create comfortable, diverse environments for learning and socializing that facilitate the intellectual and social development of all students” (Hurtado, Clayton-Pedersen, Allen, & Mile, 1998). Understanding the campus racial climate of an institution allows campus administrators, faculty, and staff to create opportunities for engagement that are meaningful and intentional for the campus and students. In addition to creating space for meaningful and intentional engagement on campus, campus racial climate looks at the racial representation on campus as well as race relations and racial conflict on campus (Hurtado, 1992). At PWI, campus racial climate is a topic that can be perceived differently, especially by students, depending on their racial identity (Mwangi, Thelamour, Ezeofor & Carpenter, 2018). Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr (2000) explained that African American students reported experiencing a negative racial climate compared to their Asian, Latino, and White peers. The African American students spoke to battling “greater racial-ethnic hostility, greater pressure to conform to stereotypes, less equitable treatment by faculty, staff, and teaching assistants and more faculty racism than did other groups” (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000, p. 183). As the literature on campus racial climate overwhelmingly explains, a dual or varying perception of it among different racial groups can create a challenging campus climate for SOC to exist in (Mwangi et al., 2018; Ancis et al., 2000; Hurtado, 1992).

Knowing that campus racial climate can be perceived differently among students by racial group, there is a greater chance for students who experience isolation or lack a

sense of belonging on campus to be more impacted by a negative campus racial climate. Johnson's (2012) study examined the impact of campus racial climate and a sense of belonging among racially diverse womyn STEM majors. The study analyzed the data from the National Study of Living-Learning Programs, a survey that measures student outcomes connected to the participation in living-learning programs at 34 PWI in the United States. The findings in this study asserted being a WOC had a negative impact on their sense of belonging and that the college environment and race/ethnicity are elements that contribute to how womyn in STEM experience a sense of belonging on their campus. Johnson declared the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in STEM programs at PWI can increase the isolation of the CRC for WOC in the sciences. The implications from this study challenge institutions to implement transformative practices that place the responsibility of change on institutions and their decision makers rather than students. Last, the researcher encouraged student affairs professionals to address and effectively tackle racial diversity concerns in STEM to assist faculty in understanding the role they play on impacting campus racial climate perceptions. Faculty being aware of their contribution to the perceptions are vital for SOC in STEM at PWI, and the lasting impact racial climate has on constructing the sense of belonging for SOC. This study confirmed the literature surrounding how a negative sense of belonging can impact the campus racial climate for SOC and especially WOC at PWI.

The knowledge institutions can gain from assessing the institutional campus racial climate is transformational to understand the retention of BWC. The campus racial climate framework provides an in-depth look at an institution's campus beliefs and racial

capacity, and with this information, institutions can create change and improve the experience of BWC and work to retain them. For scholars committed to researching the retention of BWC, the campus racial climate framework provides a foundational understanding of the factors that can contribute to challenges faced within the institution that hinder the success of BWC.

Not only is the campus racial climate framework beneficial for scholars to examine the experiences of BWC and retention, but also it forges the path for institutions to understand the role they play in upholding a negative or positive campus racial climate for BWC. Institutions with a negative campus racial climate that is embedded in the culture may find it difficult to reposition the focus on institutions and their locus of control versus BWC. Institutions do have control over the experiences that impact BWC, which connects to diversity, institutional quality, and educational effectiveness. Smith (2009) declared, “As long as diversity remains a separate component of institutional work, unrelated to other elements, it seems likely that it will remain marginalized and that core institutional processes will remain unaffected by diversity” (p. 232).

Smith (2015) posed questions for institutions to answer in reference to institutional culture as a way to understand if the institutional culture is inclusive or uniform. The questions all institutions should answer related to institutional culture are, “Is diversity visible, or is it visible by its invisibility? Does diversity seem salient in the symbols, values, and feeling of the campus?” (Smith, 2015, p. 207). Along with questioning and accessing institutional culture, institutions should foster an environment that authentically shows they care about improving and repairing institutional culture that

is not inclusive or damaging. Smith simply explained what is important to a healthy institution: “The concept of mattering—and belonging—is important to healthy institutions. It will reverberate throughout the institution, positively or negatively. It will also affect retention at every level” (p. 257). Institutions have the ability to create and shift the climate they envision or want to foster on campus. However, without diversity and inclusion as a central focus, institutions will continue to be challenged by a negative or static campus racial climate.

The previous study, which examined WOC in STEM majors and the impact campus racial climate has on their sense of belonging, is vital to improving the experience of WOC in general and in STEM majors. However, it is important to understand the bearing campus racial climate has on the retention of SOC but especially BWC. There are many factors that contribute to retention, and Lau (2003) named one of the main reasons for students leaving college: “The institution has failed to create an environment, inside or outside the classroom, that is conducive to their learning and educational needs” (p. 127). Additionally, Lau highlighted that an effective way to improve student retention, especially for SOC, is through managing multiculturalism and diversity by having an office in which the mission is to provide students with holistic and intentional (academic and social) support services to fit their needs. Creating spaces for students of color is critical because it increases their sense of belonging and indicates the institution notices them and is attempting to help them. McClain and Perry (2017) noted many factors that encourage retention and stressed cultural spaces at PWI can be “safe

havens” for SOC in which they can feel free to be themselves with other SOC and be empowered.

It is clear that campus racial climate and retention are connected to the persistence and the experience of SOC and most importantly BWC. For a BWC, an institution’s campus racial climate is negative and perceived as un-welcoming if it is resistant to the inclusion of diverse policy/practices and has a low population of SOC. The literature on campus racial climate and retention points to a higher chance of the institution not retaining BWC. However, this does not have to continue to be the case for BWC at PWI because institutions have the tools to change their campus racial climate and in turn can positively impact the retention of BWC and change the culture on campus.

Racial Essentialism

Within the college experience, finding a friend group and to balancing academics can be some of the important aspects to accomplish for students. The navigational part of finding and meeting friends seems easy, but college is not the same as walking into pre-k as many students once did many years ago. Entering college now, students have some knowledge or introduction to diversity within their curriculum in elementary and secondary school, but it is very limited (Pulliam, 2017; Tawa 2018). However, beyond what students are taught in school (elementary and secondary) related to race, diversity, etc., their sociopolitical and socio-economic environment can impact their understanding of race. So, how does understanding race and their socio-economic environment present itself when it comes to students when they enter college? It can vary; however, intergroup settings are one of the ways it does appear.

The understanding that different racial groups have the same facial features or collectively project the same behavior is racial essentialism. Tawa (2017) explained racial essentialism as “the tendency to group people into distinct racial categories and use these categories to infer attributes about people within these racial groups” (p. 516).

How can racial essentialism materialize for BWC at PWI? Racial essentialism can present differently for BWC on campus, but intergroup relations is a major place it occurs (Tawa, 2016). A study conducted by Tawa (2016) examined people’s belief about race as biological. The study examined racial belief as it relates to early life influences, intergroup outcomes, and the process of “unlearning”. The study found there to be a relationship to early exposure to diversity as a child and believing race to be biological that was connected to socioeconomic status. Belief in race as biological was also connected to lack of exposure to out-group members, and participants in the study had a significant decrease in belief in race as biological directly after participating in a race relations workshop and a follow-up “unlearning” program (Tawa, 2016). This study demonstrated that racial beliefs and understanding of other racial groups are influenced and created when children are young and become part of how they understand race and the world.

The impact of essentialism on BWC is experienced daily whether in class or on campus because they constantly have to fight off the monolithic image placed on Black people and BWC (Commodore et al., 2018; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Not only do BWC have to combat negative societal images of Black people but especially of Black womyn, which can provide a challenging experience throughout college. Since essentialism is

present for BWC at PWI, how can institutions help to combat the essentialism BWC will encounter? Acknowledgment that essentialism is present within institutions and does impact the experiences of SOC but more importantly BWC is critical. Harper (2016) conducted a study examining how scholars make sense of racial climate and the experiences of minoritized persons on predominantly White campuses. Harper found that when scholars explained racial climate issues or concerns, the focus was on fixing the student instead of looking at the systematic racial structure and the negative influence it has on SOC's experience. This study presented again the issue with institutions wanting to help SOC and not placing the blame on the institutional culture or the societal racial influence. It is critical for institutions to think about racial essentialism and the impact it has on BWC as an effort to improve and gain a better understanding of their experience at the institution.

Racial Identity Development

For students of color attending PWI, understanding and thinking about their racial identity tends to overwhelm how they make sense of their experience. Many scholars have researched the racial identity of students of color (Cross, 2001, 1991; Helms, 2012, 1990), which provides a deeper examination and model to understand racial identity development. Helms (1990) explained that racial identity development theory "concerns the psychological implications of racial-group membership that is belief systems that evolve in reaction to perceived differential group membership" (p. 3). Interpreting Helm's description of racial identity development theory, an assumption would be that all racial groups experience exploration of their racial identity. Tatum (1997) noted due to

the racial structure of dominant/subordinate between White people and people of color, the ability for development presents differently within racial groups.

When it comes to students of color at PWI, especially BWC, their racial identity development process is impacted by many elements such as others' perceptions of them as Black students, a monolithic image of Black people, etc. (Commodore et al., 2018; Dortch & Patel, 2017).

Stewart (2015) sought to develop a greater understanding of the meaning of Blackness as it related to Black racial identity in Black student communities at three different institutions. Stewart found that the students were impacted by (a) how their behaviors, habits, or preferences would be interpreted by others; (b) embodying racial performances, particularly related to Black womyn's physical appearance; and (c) centering race as the salient identity and its impact on their social interactions on campus. This study presented concerns related to the racial identity of Black students, most importantly of BWC, to be voiced and explored. Black womyn collegians confront the daily challenges of being Black womyn on campus at a PWI along with balancing how their racial identity impacts it all.

Sister Circles

The words "sister circle" are powerful and all-encompassing. A sister circle is a coping space that allows for the Black womyn to unpack and manage the constant oppressive situations she encounters (Neal-Barnett, 2011). This safe space allows her to be herself without boundaries and helps her to meet other Black womyn with similar and varying feelings. As a result of her sister circle experience, she can shed feelings of

isolation, aggression, etc., feel whole again, and be able to battle systems of oppression once again.

One of the ways to provide support to BWC is through sister circles. Croom et al. (2017) defined sister circles as counter-spaces that ostensibly serve as sites where students can not only engage in productive academic and social identity development processes but also grapple with intersectional analyses of systemic oppression occurring in the context of their respective campus environments. Sister circles have an important role at PWI to support the holistic student experience of BWC in higher education. Black womyn in college, whether undergraduate or graduate, require support beyond academic and career assistance typically provided to their student experiences because of various challenges, including juggling the impact of the interlocking systems of oppression that influence the multiple identities they hold.

For many students, this experience materializes when they are the only Black womyn in a classroom and they are expected to represent and speak for all Black people. Other students experience juggling these identities as a student leader when they are the only Black womyn student leader, and it is a feeling of loneliness. Miller (2017) noted,

However, the success of Black college women has not been at the forefront of educational discussions about student success. The limited research on Black college women suggests that they experience a form of “double jeopardy”, because of their subordinate race and gender statuses.” (p. 156).

The intersecting identities of being Black and a womyn is something BWC must tackle daily. Many Black womyn do not understand the interlocking complexity of managing these two identities in their everyday life because BWC were not born into the societal

political climate in which all people (White males, White womyn) are socialized to exist. Sister circles allow for BWC to work through the challenging experiences of being Black and a womyn on campus and in society in a safe and empowering atmosphere.

Scholars' definitions of sister circles. Scholars defined sister circles in a variety of ways within different fields and even use other words to define spaces similar to sister circles. The definitions of sister circle were similar in context for many articles and dissertations in the education field, but they varied in other disciplines, such as psychology, leadership, and counseling. Croom et al. (2017) defined “sister circle” similar to Black Greek-letter sororities. These spaces have been constructed through communities of Black womyn to respond to racist and sexist alienation and isolation experienced within the larger campus community (Mitchell, 2000; Patton & McClure, 2009; Porter & Dean, 2015; Watt, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, 2009).

“Sister friend” was the next definition used that was close to sister circle. Bryant-Davis (2013) noted, “For African American women, social support is an important component for healing and empowerment. It is often sister friends who are consistent sources of encouragement, guidance, and light. According to Short & Williams (2014),

Sister circle approach operates from the standpoint that women and girls working together harness a power to heal themselves. Through connectivity, support and strengthening of relationships, women, and girls have an opportunity to address shared concerns that manifest in their lives. (p. 78)

The studies that used network groups as a definition to connect to sister circles explained that network groups are designed to help members identify those few others who are like

them within an organization, build relationships with those people, and have access to an additional layer of social support (Friedman et al., 1998).

“Social support” was another phrase used to explain the space or network vital for Black womyn to be successful. Vaux (1981) suggested that “social support is perhaps best seen as a multifaceted, multidimensional meta-construct, involving social support resources, supportive behaviors, and feelings or beliefs that one is supported” (p. 1). One specific form of social support, mentors and mentoring, was used to explain the importance of having a mentoring relationship for Black womyn. Hill and Ragland (1995) defined mentors as those who “guide, train, and support a less skilled or experienced person called a novice, mentee, or protégé” (p. 72). Patton and Harper (2003) explained, “Mentoring is a cornerstone in the success of graduate education and depends highly on student-faculty relationships propelled by trust, integrity, opportunity, and understanding” (p. 68).

As stated before, the definitions of sister circle and similar phrases used varied phrases; however, the collective definition centered on themes of guidance, support, safe space, healing place, empowerment, and building relationships. Although the definitions of sister circles vary across fields and within disciplines, the overarching theme is sister circles as safe and welcoming spaces to build community and symbolize the essence of empowerment for Black womyn.

Impact of sister circles on Black womyn of color. The literature surrounding sister circles is very slim, but the literature that does exist presents the beauty of sister circles that provide a sense of wholeness for BWC. Croom et al.’s (2017) study

highlighted the motivations of UBW to engage in sister circle-type student organizations or similar groups that centered on race and/or gender. The study shed light on the lack of interest in UBW's development and social experience on college and university campuses. The use of a critical race feminist qualitative lens aided how the researchers examined semi-structured, one-on-one interviews and focus groups with six undergraduate Black womyn. From this epistemological study's findings, three motivations emerged that impacted UBW to participate in these organizations: (a) microaggressions, (b) blatant racist and sexist encounters, and (c) a need to find and/or build communities within which to belong on campus. The motivations were followed by three themes found in the results of observation, finding role models, and being whole. The study's implications for research and practice urge institutions to create spaces for students to understand the lasting impact of their experience on campus. The researchers highlighted the importance of providing counter-spaces to unpack and tackle the issues of oppression they face.

Croom et al.'s (2017) study is one of the few studies about sister circles in which the researchers confronted institutional agents to dig deeper into the impact of White supremacist ideals that influence and are engrained in the foundation of many PWI. More researchers need to take this approach of calling on institutional leaders to change the culture that impacts BWC's experience negatively, which is one of the main reason counter-spaces are needed.

Although the previous study highlighted the UBW experience with sister circles, it is also important to see the impact on Black graduate womyn as well. For them, sister

circles can serve as a support to empower them but be very integral in persistence to graduation. Jordan's (2017) study looked to identify and examine factors related to the persistence of African American womyn who pursue doctoral degrees at PWI. The guiding research question of the study was "What are the factors that contribute to the successful attainment of doctoral degrees by African American womyn on Predominantly White Campuses?" Theoretical frameworks used in this phenomenology study were Black feminist thought, Schlossberg's marginality and mattering, Claude Steele's stereotype threat, and Bandura's self-efficacy theory. The findings overwhelmingly explained that support networks were vital to the persistence of African American womyn in doctoral programs. The participants in the study attributed the positive impact of support networks on their success in completing their doctoral programs. This study provided a look into the way sister circles can be a focal point of retention for Black graduate womyn and change their experience in the future.

Although sister circles are beneficial to BWC's experience at PWI, it is also important to note how these counter-spaces can aid Black womyn administrators who help BWC create them. Henry and Glenn (2009) aimed to continue the dialogue regarding the impact of the lack of critical mass and systemic racism on the success of Black womyn employed in higher education. The researcher defined support systems within this article as opportunities for African American womyn to form sister circles and share counter stories that refute some of the negative information they may have received during their daily campus routines. The theoretical framework used in this article was Black feminist thought and critical race theory. The findings presented individual and

institutional strategies that impact the success of Black womyn in higher education. For Black womyn, the individual strategies were connecting through mentoring and connecting through involvement in professional organizations. The institutional strategies that impact the success of Black womyn were connecting through programming and connective strategies such as mentoring. This article provided valuable information about strategies that can impact the success of Black womyn.

Steele (2017) explained how sister circles provided a stronger sense of self:

Affirming spaces such as sister circles centered around encouraging the academic self-concept can increase the thoughts of “being good enough” and allow the defining of their own reality and what success means as a Black woman seeking a college education. (p. 9)

The powerful influence of sister circles and the lasting impact they can have on BWC at PWI is truly needed to change the narrative of BWC experience. The literature provided was just a touch of what needs and should to be written about sister circles and how BWC can benefit from these types of counter-spaces.

Sister circles as counter-spaces. For BWC, having a nurturing and supportive environment during college at a PWI is fundamental. The challenges BWC face daily at PWI daily include microaggressions, isolation, and not feeling accepted within the norm of the campus community. Rosales and Person (2003) explained,

African American women need extensive support to succeed in college—support that is inclusive of their academic, social, cultural, economic, career, interpersonal, and intrapersonal needs. This broad-based support should provide a basis for these women to engage in a holistic educational experience in college. (p. 55)

BWC need intentional and long-term programming that offers a holistic approach to help them understand how to cope and fit into the campus community. Likewise, institutions

must supply support and responsibility, which is a critical factor to delivering the holistic experience BWC need. Creating space for BWC to connect and feel comfortable is important, and an institution can provide this through workshops, connection groups, and funding to sustain these programs.

A holistic approach considers social, academic, and emotional experiences rather than simply offering programs that encompass these elements. Quaye and Harper (2014) stated,

When students enter with characteristics and backgrounds that suggest they need customized services and resources, we maintain that educators and administrators should be proactive in assessing those needs and creating the environmental conditions that will enable such students to thrive. (p. 12).

The counter-spaces serve as additional support services, which can be instrumental in the experience of SOC. Dowell's (2010) study examined the role of university-sponsored student support services as a critical factor in the educational trajectory of African American students in PWI. The findings explained that the minority/multicultural affairs office was used by 54% of the students in the study. The office seemed to be a focal point for the students and a major place of support. The implications of this study challenged institutions to conduct a five-year longitudinal study examining the use and value of university-sponsored student support services starting with pre-first-year summer programs. Additionally, Dowell expressed the need for administrators to provide non-intimidating venues for students to express their opinions about their educational experiences and to incorporate feedback from students in the decisions made as student life is concerned. This study illustrated the importance of student support services and

pushing institutions to assess the value and incorporate students into the decision-making process of the support services. There is value in an institutional effort to incorporate students into important decisions.

Institutions as sites for sister circles. The current literature about sister circles focused on the need for them to exist and the important role they play in the lives of Black womyn (Croom et al., 2017; Rosales & Person, 2003). Although the literature on sister circles points to needing them and college campuses as the main space in which they currently exist and should be housed, the missing link in the literature is the concept of institutional responsibility and nurturing sister circles.

Institutions can be sites for sister circles, but it is important that the support (financial and institutional) needed to sustain these counter-spaces is present and continual. There are various layers to supporting sister circles, and a vital element consists of PWI acknowledging the systematic oppression embedded within society and higher education. Commodore et al. (2018) noted,

In particular, we argue that underlying patriarchal and Eurocentric epistemologies and aesthetics must be challenged and deconstructed in favor of inclusive philosophies that can accommodate Black women. We will also argue that Black women leaders need to help shape inclusive organizational cultures for all students, including Black women. (p. 85)

Institutions must intentionally challenge and dismantle the patriarchal and Eurocentric ideologies to nurture counter-spaces such as sister circles for BWC. Upholding the same foundational and negative ideologies that permeate the institution can be counterproductive to establishing and nurturing sister circles. The intentional support

from institutions and administrators for sister circles requires an authentic desire to help BWC as the sole beneficiary of having sister circles on campus.

Commodore et al. (2018) declared, “Institutional intentionality in creating an environment for students that addresses multifaceted needs of the student leads to holistic success for Black students which in turn leads to postgraduate success” (p. 89). For an institution to truly want to change the experience of BWC, a genuine effort must be put forth, and BWC need to feel invested and connected as well.

In addition to institutions being sites for sister circles, the cultural center within the institution must be able to support the needs of a sister circle-type program. Patton (2010) spoke to the importance of cultural centers remembering their purpose: “Rooted in a mission of social justice and an agenda to promote critical navigational skills for their multiracial communities, campus culture centers nurture resilience and resistance and ultimately promote retention and academic achievement well beyond graduation” (p. 99). It is vital for institutions to be able to have cultural centers that students can relate to and feel the center represents them and their best interest. According to Patton (2010), “culture centers should consistently be reminded of their obligation to serve as a culturally safe space where students of color can see themselves reflected, embraced and valued” (p. 45). The hard work of nurturing and supporting sister circle programs is not just the job of the institution’s cultural center but also institutional administrators. The responsibility has been placed on BWC for so long, and it is time for institutions to put the needs of BWC to the forefront for once.

Theoretical Framework: Black Feminist Thought

Collins (2002) spoke no truer words than when she stated, “Rearticulating a Black women’s standpoint refashions the concrete and reveals the more universal human dimensions of Black women’s everyday lives” (p. 268). Eurocentric society has continuously created their own narrative of who and what the Black womyn or girl is and stolen our ability to define our experiences (Cooper et al., 2017; Collins, 2002). Therefore, if Black womyn are forced into a narrative they do not own—one that is projected on them—where do they find freedom? It lies in the embodiment of Black feminist thought (BFT): for Black womyn intellectuals to be at the front of the journey to freedom for Black womyn—themselves.

Black feminist thought helped to lay the foundation of how Black womyn understand who they are as they navigate their community and the world. Collins (2002) explained, “Reclaiming Black women’s ideas involves discovering, reinterpreting, and, in many cases, analyzing for the first time the works of individual U.S. Black women thinkers who were so extraordinary that they did manage to have their ideas preserved” (p. 13). The voice of the Black womyn has always been suppressed and made to feel not needed in society (Cooper, 2018; hooks, 1989). hooks (1989) beautifully expressed the importance of BFT and voice:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of “talking back,” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice. (p. 9)

hooks declared the voice of the oppressed should be heard and the ability to step to the forefront through speech. Those words are symbolic for the Black womyn and are displayed utilizing BFT as the vehicle to talk back and center her voice and presence in society.

Porter (2017) noted, “BFT is guided by the experiences of Black women and supports the importance of examining how Black women articulate their identity. BFT sheds light on the interlocking nature of oppression—the crucial intersections and similarities that connect black women” (p. 89). Collins (2002) highlighted ways of developing BFT as a critical social theory focused on “its commitment to justice, both for U.S. Black women as a collectivity and for that of other similarly oppressed groups” (p. 9). As Howard-Hamilton (2003) noted, the BFT framework has three central themes: (a) the lived experiences of Black womyn and the stories documented but not told by them; (b) Black womyn have unique experiences and stories, yet still there are intersecting elements shared by Black womyn; and (c) Black womyn do share common lived experiences, but through class, age, religion, and sexual orientation collectively, Black womyn have varied ways of being understood.

Additionally, Collins (1998) focused on the experience of Black womyn as an “outsider within” who connects strongly to the academy. The “outsiders within” are “individuals who found themselves in marginal locations between groups of varying power” (p. 5). Many Black womyn in higher education experience the outsider within position regularly, and BFT provides the ability to name the experience and challenge it at the same time.

Along with BFT, Collins (1993) explained the matrix of domination in relation to the experience of Black womyn highlighting race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression Black womyn are faced with. I used Collins' theorizing and looked for elements of the matrix of domination as it emerged in the data.

In this study, I focused on two elements of BFT to examine the impact of sister circles on the experiences of BWC at PWI. The first element speaks to Black womyn taking back the suppressed knowledge of the Black womyn before us, thereby "offering Black women a different view of themselves and their world than that offered by the established social order" (Collins, 1989, p. 750). There is importance rooted in reclaiming the Black womyn's existence, and voice is a priority; therefore, continued research is needed to express the oppressed experience of Black womyn. The second element is finding a voice and safe spaces in which Black womyn can speak freely among Black womyn with similar feelings without fear of judgment. Collins (2002) explained, "This realm of relatively safe discourse, however narrow, is a necessary condition for Black women's resistance" (p. 100). Finding a voice is a focal theme of BFT: "Finding a voice to express a collective, self-defined Black women's standpoint remains a core theme in Black feminist thought" (Collins, 2002, p. 99). A focal point I highlighted is how the lives of Black womyn have long been narrated by outsiders, and according to Howard-Hamilton (2003), it is time for Black womyn to "develop, redefine, and explain their own stories based on the importance of Black women's culture" (p. 22). These elements of BFT guided my study as a way to gain a better understanding and interpret the experience and the voice of BWC at PWI.

Within higher education, scholars have used the BFT framework as a vehicle to examine and understand the lived experiences of Black womyn surviving in resistance to the system of opposition (Johnson-Bailey, 2004). The framework has helped scholars to explore how race and gender factor into Black womyn's experiences as well. Other scholars utilize BFT to better understand and challenge the male-dominated systems in which Black womyn are forced to endure and "feminist theories' traditional emphasis the oppressive conditions of women" (Green et al., 2018, p. 297). The BFT framework has been used to expand and explore the daily experiences of Black womyn and connects both feminist and critical theories as a form of resistance for Black womyn.

The BFT framework connected to my topic because I examined the impact of sister circles on BWC, and this framework pushes Black womyn to challenge the way society has defined them, and through sister circles, they can reclaim their voice and existence. Additionally, another aspect of the framework is safe spaces and safe discourse as it relates to Black womyn speaking freely and without judgment.

My use of BFT in my study called for me to think about the elements of Black womyn and the need to have our own story told by us. The research question I aimed to answer requires understanding and examining the experiences of BWC: *How do institutions create climates that nurture sister circles for Black womyn collegians to develop, succeed, and persist at PWI?*

Conclusion

To be able to answer my research question, *How do institutions create climates that nurture sister circles for Black womyn collegians to develop, succeed, and persist at*

PWI?, it was imperative to provide the background information of three key elements that connect to the research question. First, understanding the story of Black womyn in higher education, both undergraduate and graduate Black womyn, because although they have a connected experience, they still face unique challenges. The background information provides a sequential illustration of the challenges BWC have developing, succeeding, and persisting at PWI. Second, learning about the retention of BWC at PWI is directly tied to the campus racial climate and the impact it has on the institution and the experience of BWC. Last, defining sister circles and explaining the importance of the theoretical framework of BFT connects why this question needs to be answered and how beneficial my study is for BWC.

Chapter Summary

Within this chapter, the experiences of Black womyn in higher education explain the connection to the treatment of BWC. This is followed by the experiences of undergraduate and graduate Black womyn attending a PWI. The importance of retention of BWC is discussed to understand the impact institutional culture has on the experience of BWC at PWI. This chapter also provides a deeper understanding of the impact of sister circles in higher education and on the experiences of BWC. Last, the theoretical framework of Black feminist thought is discussed. In Chapter 3, I explain the importance of using a case study design to answer my research question.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN

Support for Black womyn collegians (BWC) at predominately White institutions (PWI) is lacking, and it is important for institutions to create climates that nurture counter-spaces like sister circles so Black womyn's development, success, and persistence lead to retention. The lack of institutional support for BWC needs to be addressed, and PWI must take action to help BWC develop, succeed, and persist. Within this chapter, I first provide an overview of the case study design to answer the research question. Next, I discuss my role as a researcher and describe the aspects of my life and understanding of my identities that contribute to my experiential knowledge that influence my research decisions. Lastly, I discuss the site of the data, data sources, and recruitment, collection, and analysis methods.

Positionality

This study was very important for all BWC, but it stems from my experience as an undergraduate and graduate Black womyn attending a PWI. My experience as a Black womyn from my youth to my adulthood has made a major impact on my academic and personal journey as a Black womyn. I know my experience as a BWC at Susquehanna University (SU) shaped my passion to examine how counter spaces such as sister circles can change the experiences of BWC at PWIs. As an undergraduate Black womyn, there were no student organizations or institutional initiatives focused on BWC when I attended, and this lack of support for BWC was strikingly apparent to me as a student. At the time, I did not know the terms or have the vocabulary to explain it, but I knew

something was missing from my experience on campus. I along with other BWC attending SU, felt it was imperative to create the spaces we needed and to find the community vital for us to survive and thrive. With the help of one Black womyn administrator on campus, we were able to create space to have a chapter for the first African American sorority on campus and found a society named after the first Black womyn to graduate from the institution. The presence of these two organizations was historic for the institution and transformed the experiences of the current BWC and future BWC to attend SU. The institutional responsibility to BWC was a driving force of my research within this study, and the important of understanding the impact it has on BWC stemmed from my experience at SU.

There is not one event or experience that made this research topic interesting to me; rather, it has been a combination of experiences in college, my academic journey and ability to reflect on experiences that pushed me to this research about BWC and our survival in higher education. However, it is important to explain within the study that as a student I had to create counter-spaces for Black womyn students at my undergraduate institution and how impactful the experience was to me during and after college. While my experiences played a major role in my desire to engage in this research, my experience also influenced my methodological choices as a researcher. For example, within my process, I was transparent about the study by allowing participants to review the themes found within the data to ensure I captured what they actually said in the interviews. This member-check process was essential as I wanted this study's participants to feel a part of the research process, not just participants recounting their experience.

Creating a sense of rapport with the participants was also crucial for me because I wanted them to understand my experience, connection to the topic, and desire to help them along with other BWC experiencing the same challenges they faced at PWI. I developed this rapport by drawing from my undergraduate and graduate experiences in an authentic way, so the connection was able to happen organically.

My epistemological identity centers on constructivism, and I believe meaning is guided by relationship building and interactions with others and constructed based on my sociopolitical stances, which influence how I understand and see the world. As a researcher, my epistemological outlook impacts the way I choose to interact with research. I believe one's identities shape how they make sense of their interactions and experiences in life. As Black womyn scholar, I understand my epistemological view will inform how and why I decide to engage in research through that lens.

Research Design: Overview

Qualitative research is meant to gain a deeper understanding of people and their experiences in life (Glesne, 2016). There are many aspects that are very important in qualitative research that enable the researcher to “understand how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Although qualitative research is a staple method of choice in education research, qualitative methods have roots in anthropology and sociology (Glesne, 2016; Merriam, 2009). My research question lends itself to qualitative methods, as I want to answer the “how” of my research topic. I elected to use qualitative research because through this type of research, the goal is to understand and explain how

people function in specific environments and make meaning of interactions that they have (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). The beauty of qualitative research is the connection formed with participants and the ability to interpret their experiences from their point of view, and this occurs with the role of researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009). I worked to ensure the genuine and true voices and experiences of these BWC are displayed in their own words.

Case Study Research

Among the many options of qualitative research designs to select, case study is highlighted positively in exploring experiences: “This method has been tried and found to be a direct and satisfying way of adding to experience and improving understanding” (Stake, 1978, p. 7). The prominent scholars of case study research are Robert Stake, Robert Yin, and Sharan Merriam, and all three scholars have varying epistemologies on how to conduct a case study (Yazan, 2015). Although all of the scholars are passionate about case study research, their philosophies vary and provide an interesting way of conducting case study. Stake and Merriam hold true to a constructivist epistemology, while Yin leans more to a positivist view as a researcher (Yazan, 2015). Within my research and this study, I aligned more with constructivist and standpoint epistemology, which connects more to Stake and Merriam.

Stake (1995) explained case study simply and said, “Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). A defining element of case study is the bounded system, which is “a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (Merriam,

2009, p. 40). The bounded system allows for the case to be specific about “what” is being studied or included in the case and what is not.

There are three types of case studies: intrinsic case study, instrumental case study, and collective case study. According to Stake (1995), an intrinsic case study focuses on a particular interest (i.e., child, program, conference) of the researcher to gain a better understanding of the case. Instrumental case study aims to give more insight into an issue, and the case is of secondary interest to the main issue. The collective case study can involve more than one case and examines a larger group in the belief that the results will provide a better understanding of the case. I conducted an intrinsic case study, as I examined the impact of a specific program.

For this study, it was vital to bound the topic, and within case study, the bounded system requires the researcher to clearly state what exactly is and is not being studied. Case study design aligns best with the research question I have set out to answer because of the ability to focus on a single case to gain a deeper understanding of the complex elements within the case (Stake, 2005). My case was the sister circle program at Hope State University, so it was a single-case design. A single-case design focuses on one event, program, or individual of interest and aims “to study the experience of real cases operating in a real situation” (Stake, 2005, p. 3).

Along with providing a deeper understanding of the case within the study, case study attempts to uncover the “how” and “why” in the case, leading to a cause-and-effect relation of the study (Cohen & Manion, 1979). A research question centered on “how” is more explanatory, and the best way to examine that is through case study (Yin, 2014).

Yin (2014) declared that “how” and “why” questions have operational threads that need to be examined over the time of the case being studied. My use of case study method is intentional because case study allows “leaning toward those cases that seem to offer opportunity to learn” (Stake, 1995, p. 152). I selected case study for my particular study because through this method, the impact of sister circle programs and the stories and experiences of BWC can be heard. In addition, the information from this case study can be utilized to help PWI understand the changes needed to improve the experience of BWC and create climates that nurture counter-spaces for BWC to develop, succeed, and persist.

As Cohen et al. (2011) explained, “It is important in case studies for events and situations to be allowed to speak for themselves, rather than to be largely interpreted, evaluated or judged by the researcher” (p. 1979). This aspect of case study connected to me because of the importance of the voices and experiences of BWC, and through case study, the stories, experiences, and, most importantly, the voices of these Black womyn were authentically theirs.

Research Question

The aim of the study is to answer the main research question: *How do institutions create climates that nurture sister circles for Black womyn collegians to develop, succeed, and persist at PWI?*

The Case

The selection of the case and site of the study was important and systematic for me because having criteria for the case provided a system for inclusion and exclusion

during selection. Merriam (2009) explained: “To find the best case to study, you would first establish the criteria that will guide case selection and then select a case that meets those criteria” (p. 81). I selected the case looking for two main elements: (a) existence of counter-spaces for BWC (e.g., a sister circle program) and (b) the presence of institutional actions and initiatives that promote diversity and inclusion for BWC. The case in my study is the sister circle program at Hope State University and experiences of its BWC and administrators impacting the program.

Glesne (2014) explained the importance of selecting a site: “To make such decisions, you must look again at your research interests and carefully reflect on what you want to learn” (p. 47). The institution has physical space for students of color housed in the Student Multicultural Center, and the student organization “Sister Circle” functions under the Division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Another part of the selection criteria was for counter-spaces and support programs for SOC to have been in existence for five years or more. The reason for selecting five years as the beginning point was due to programs in their infancy years (one, two, and three) providing less stability, so I wanted to select a program that has functioned for many years. I felt the institution displayed action and initiatives to promoting diversity and inclusion by the counter-spaces provided for students, faculty, and staff, along with having won the Higher Education Excellence in Diversity Award for the last five years. For students, the following initiatives/programs were available: Student Diversity Action Council, Male Empowerment Network, Sister Circle, All the CEO Ladies, Flashes of Fem Coalition, and Ksurge. For faculty and staff, the following initiatives and programs were available:

Latino Networking Caucus, Provost Faculty Associates for Diversity, Spectrum (LGBTQ+ advocacy initiatives), and University Diversity Action Council. These programs alluded to an institutional value of diversity and inclusion.

Research Setting

The case study was conducted at Hope State University, a public research university in the Northeast (Hope State University, 2018). The university, which is home to one main campus and seven satellite campuses, is 20-40 minutes from the metropolitan area within the state. Founded in 1910 as the premier training ground for elementary teachers, the university founding president focused on making education affordable to all in the state, especially at this institution. The university provides undergraduate and graduate degrees along with certificates and online programs. The student enrollment is 39,367, with 33,568 undergraduate students and 5,799 graduate students. As of 2017-2018, the student population is 62% womyn and 38% men. The racial representation of the undergraduate student population is 77.1% White, 7.7% African-American or Black, 3.7% multi-racial, 3.5% international, 3.3% Hispanic or Latinx, 1.4 % Asian, 0.2% Native American or Alaskan Native, 0.1 % Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 2.9 % did not identify race. The racial representation of the graduate population is 65.9 % White, 16.6% international, 5.6 % African-American or Black, 2.8% Asian, 2.6% Hispanic or Latinx, 1.4 % multi-racial, 0.2% Native American or Alaskan Native, 0.0% Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 4.9% did not identify race (Hope State University, 2018).

History of the Sister Circle Program at Hope State University

The original sister circle program, which was called Sister 2 Sister, was created in 2010. The goal of the workshop was to provide a space for faculty, staff, and students to come together and have real conversations about their experiences at the institution as they related to social, professional, and personal development. The workshop occurred during Kupita/Transiciones, the pre-orientation program for students of color at the university, which only happened once a year. In 2010, after noticing the large impact on the faculty, staff, and students there was a desire for the workshop to continue throughout the academic year on a regular basis. The overall structure of the program consisted of faculty and staff who volunteered their time to plan and execute the workshops that were housed within the Student Multicultural Center, but there was not one specific person in charge. The workshop consisted of panels, generally made up of faculty and staff, but students were not heavily involved in the process. The students were invited to attend the workshops, but the faculty and staff coordinated the different events. In 2013, the Student Multicultural Center wanted to focus on the student experience portion to the workshops, so the concept shifted from a faculty, staff, and students' program to just a womyn of color student program. The workshops provided an impactful and developmental opportunity for the womyn of color students who participated, but the Student Multicultural Center and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion administrators wanted to provide a more formal space for womyn of color students. The aim of the program was to have conversations about their experiences, develop more leadership opportunities, and be more involved in the planning process. The newly formed sister circle program is

housed within and funded by the Student Multicultural Center with oversight from the Director of the Student Multicultural Center and the Assistant Director as the direct advisor for the program. Although the sister circle program was advised by the assistant director, a student organization executive board structure was put in place as well. The sister circle program budget is a line item within the Student Multicultural Center budget, which is allotted annually. The sister circle program is an initiative that aims to establish strong support for womyn of color and focuses on social, cultural, and personal development.

Recruitment Procedures/Participant Selection

The selection of participants in this study was very important and critical, so I made contact via email (Appendix C) with the director and assistant director of the Student Multicultural Center through a mentor with a prior relationship with the assistant director. The assistant director, who had the access to students (undergraduate and graduate) and faculty and staff involved in the sister circle, was able to identify students to interview who met the participant criteria. The selection criterion for the participants included: identify as a currently enrolled student, African-American or Black, and an undergraduate member of the Sister Circle program.

In addition to the above participants, I felt it imperative to interview Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion administrators such as the vice president of diversity and inclusion, associate vice president of diversity and inclusion leadership, and the assistant director of the student multicultural center/advisor to the sister circle program, who directly worked with and made decisions for the sister circle program. These interviews allowed me to

gain deeper insight into how the institution supported the program and BWC. These administrators provided an understanding of their decision-making, policy creation, and implementation role. Another administrator I interviewed was the assistant director of the Women's Center due to the Black womyn student initiative, Where Do Black Women Go? I provided the administrators with an introductory video as part of my recruitment process. The introductory video summarized my study and the benefit of the study for BWC attending a PWI. I also attended the sister circle general meeting as a way to connect with the participants and introduce myself

Sources of Data

Within this study, I used three sources of evidence for data collection. Yin (2014) noted, "The various sources are highly complementary, and a good case study will, therefore, want to rely on as many sources as possible" (p. 105). Utilizing multiple sources deepens the trustworthiness of the study and allows for triangulation among the document review, interviews, and observation. The three sources I used included the following: (a) documents, (b) interviews, and (c) observations. Each of these data sources and their connection to the research question is outlined in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Research Question Connection to Data Sources

	Interviews	Observation	Documentation
Collection	1-on-1 interviews with undergraduate students in the sister circle program 1-on-1 interviews with sister circle program administrators 1-on-1 interview with the Women's Center administrator Focus group with undergraduate students in the sister circle program	Follow-up sister circle executive board meeting General sister circle meeting	Public documents (i.e., recruitment documents, orientation programs) Sister circle program documents Diversity, equity and inclusion documents
Questions for Data	Do you feel supported by your institution as a BWC? Why? How? How does the sister circle program impact your experience on campus? In what ways do you feel the sister circle program helps you develop, succeed and persist? How do you feel the institution provides support for administrators to help BWC? Can you provide examples of oppression you experienced on campus as a BWC?	What issues are discussed during the exec board meetings about BWC? How are events created to help BWC develop, succeed and persist? What type of atmosphere provides the best support for sister circle meetings and events? How are BWC impacted by the SC general meetings and events?	How does the institution provide support for BWC? What sister circle program documents are used to recruit BWC? How does the diversity mission promote BWC to develop, succeed and persist? How does the strategic plan incorporate supporting the sister circle program and BWC?
Analysis Procedure	Categorizing by theme Pattern coding	Descriptive coding Pattern coding	Categorizing by theme Descriptive coding

Note. Research question: How do institutions create climates that nurture sister circles for Black womyn collegians to develop, succeed and persist?

Interviews

The interviews served as the primary source of data because the individual and the focus group interviews allowed me to engage in a deeper and more complex way to understand the lived experiences of the womyn in the sister circle program and on campus. Thus, I engaged in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with student and administrator participants. The aim of the semi-structured interviews was to understand the experiences of the BWC and the ways the sister circle program impacted their experience at the institution and beyond. I conducted one-on-one interviews with the administrators to provide a deeper understanding of the influence of the campus climate on the sister circle program and to know the type of support the institution provided for the sister circle program beyond the student perspective. Merriam (2009) declared, “Interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (p. 89). For the researcher and the participant, semi-structured interviews allow the conversation to flow more and presented the opportunity for the researcher to be open to “new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). The ability to interview these Black womyn about their experiences within the sister circle program added additional aspects to understanding the program and their experiences, which only enriched my study.

I conducted a focus group with the students in the study in addition to the one-on-one interviews. The focus group provided an additional layer of rich information and insight into the collective experiences of the students in the sister circle program. Glesne (2016) noted that focus groups “can have emancipatory qualities if the topic is such that

the discussion gives voice to silenced experiences or augments personal reflection, growth, and knowledge development” (p. 126). The focus group allowed for me as the researcher to gain a more in-depth view into the experiences of BWC in the sister circle and allowed for the students to speak authentically, which provided other aspects of the topic not presented in the other sources of data.

Direct Observations

The essence of counter-spaces such as sister circles centers on the importance of having a physical space to meet. For these BWC, this space can symbolize an emotional and physical setting of solace, and I feel it is important for me to visually and emotionally experience space. I observed how the participants interacted within the space and the sister circle general meeting. Merriam (2009) explained, “Observations take place in the setting where the phenomenon of interest naturally occurs instead of a location designated for the purpose of interviewing” (p. 117). By observing the sister circle program general meeting, the direct observation provided me with a “real-world setting of the case” (Yin, 2014, p. 113). The observation provided a connection to the experiences shared in the interviews, and being able to experience the counter-space also informed how I interpreted the other data sources

Document Review

I reviewed documents that gave more information about the sister circle program, that were used to encourage and support BWC to engage in the sister circle programs, that were utilized to recruit BWC to the institution, and that promoted diversity and inclusion within the institution for BWC. The additional documents for review I collected

were the Student Multicultural Center brochure, which promoted the sister circle program to the public and served as a recruitment tool (for students and the institution), and recruitment material for pre-orientation programs focused on BWC. The other documents I reviewed were connected to the institution's efforts toward inclusion such as its equity and inclusion annual report, diversity scorecard, university diversity initiatives, and campus climate executive summary. These documents were a secondary source of data.

Data Collection Procedures

After I received Institutional Review Board approval from Clemson University (Appendix A), a mentor connected me with the assistant director of the Student Multicultural Center at Hope State University, who introduced me to the sister circle program executive board. After the introduction emails were sent, I had the assistant director identify students for the study who fit the participant selection criteria. I then shared with the identified student an introductory video about my study. The video explained my study and my experience as a BWC and connected me with these womyn before I met them. During the sister circle general meeting, I had the identified students complete the demographic questionnaire (Appendix F). Next, I emailed the students the recruitment email (Appendix C), which specifically noted information about the focus group and one-on-one interviews. The one-on-one interviews were conducted with a mix of the sister circle executive and general members.

After emailing the student participants, I made contact via email with the vice president of diversity and inclusion, associate vice president of diversity and inclusion leadership, and assistant director of the Women's Center and requested one-on-one

interviews. All the administrators were provided the recruitment email (Appendix D). Once the student participants and administrator participants confirmed their interview times, the data collection process started.

All aspects of my study connected to my research question and were important to understand how the data sources tied in as well. Table 4.1 provided the data sources, the questions for data, and the data analysis for each source. Within case study, it is imperative to understand the questions as they are the reflection of the study.

Interviews

As explained in the sources of data, I scheduled nine one-on-one interviews with students (four undergraduate students recommended by the assistant director and four administrators). The interviews were conducted in a room in the Student Multicultural Center, so I was available in familiar space for the students. I made between 45 and 60 minutes available for each interview, but the interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 33 minutes, and at the beginning of the interview, I provided each participant with the Study Participant letter (see Appendix G). The participants were informed that the interview was recorded and would be transcribed using a pseudonym they provided to me to establish confidentiality.

The administrator participant interviews were conducted in the offices of the administrator. I made between 45 and 60 minutes available for each interview, but the interviews ranged from 21 minutes to 51 minutes, and at the beginning of the interview, I provided each participant with the Study Participant letter (see Appendix H). The

participants were informed that the interview was recorded and would be transcribed using a pseudonym they provided to me to establish confidentiality.

Semi-structured interviews were used because this type of interview is more flexible and “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 90). These one-on-one interviews served as open and relaxed dialogue with these womyn to learn more about their experiences in sister circles and at a PWI. After the transcription of all one-on-one interviews, the participants were emailed the themes found within the data for member checking. Glesne (2016) noted the importance of member checking: “Ask if you got correctly his or her responses and interpreted them in a useful way in the context of the report” (p. 212). The participants were asked if they identified with the themes provided and could offer additional comments if they wanted to add to the interview feedback. Any feedback or comments I received were incorporated.

The next interview I conducted was the focus group with student participants. I conducted a focus group in addition to one-on-one interviews because reaching the BWC collectively was vital to my study and allowed me to dig deeper into their sister circle experience and life at a PWI. Glesne (2016) explained, “The researcher would use a focus group to better understand how a group would discuss some issue and elicit multiple perspectives in the process” (p. 123). I limited the focus group to six participants, which allowed me to manage and direct the conversation. Morgan (1997) declared focus groups of six to 10 happen to be small enough to have a rich conversation and focus groups larger than 10 can be difficult to keep on task. The focus group interview was conducted

in a room in the Student Multicultural Center where the sister circle meets, again to meet in a familiar space for them. I made between 60 and 120 minutes available for the focus group interview, which only lasted 65 minutes, and at the beginning of the interview, I provided the student participants with the Study Participant Letter (Appendix G). The participants were informed that the interview was recorded and would be transcribed with the pseudonyms they provided to me to establish confidentiality. After the focus group transcription, the student participants were emailed the emergent themes interpreted from the focus group interview, which served as the member checking to ensure the researcher has interpreted the words of the participants correctly (Glesne, 2016; Merriam 2009).

Observations

Once I arrived on campus, I conducted a tour of the Student Multicultural Center before my observation of the sister circle general meeting. I observed the physical space in which the sister circle program met, which helped me learn more about the environment of the counter-space and how it informed my study. Observing the sister circle general meeting allowed for an understanding of the “real-world” lived experience of the participants in the sister circle. Merriam (2009) noted, “Observers need to be open to early impressions and feelings about what is going on in a setting because it is these early impressions that help determine subsequent patterns of observation” (p. 120). I wanted to observe the natural setting of the Student Multicultural Center, which is home to many students of color and the sister circle program. Being able to observe the overall atmosphere of the center was so exciting, and it helped me learn more about the space for BWC.

Documentation

Before the campus visit, I utilized the university website and searched for the following materials for review: division of diversity, equity and inclusion annual report, diversity scorecard, university diversity initiatives, and the campus climate executive summary. During the campus visit, I added the Student Multicultural Center brochure, which was available to prospective students, current students, and the public. All these materials allowed me to have a deeper understanding of the sister circle and what influence or connection the BWC had to the sister circle program. The documents provided me with additional information to connect and compare to the interviews and observations conducted, adding rigor to my study.

Memos

Throughout my data collection process, I used memos to help me reflect after each interview, observation, and document review. Glesne (2016) asserted, “By writing memos to yourself or keeping a reflective field log, you develop your thoughts, by getting your thoughts down as they occur, no matter how preliminary or in what form, you begin the analysis process” (p. 189). Immediately following each interview and the sister circle observation, I wrote a memo of the interview. These memos allowed me to summarize directly after each interview/observation and add any notes I wrote during the interview/observation. The memos helped me connect and reflect with the participants and during and after the interviews.

Reflective Journal

At the end of each day, I wrote a reflective journal entry to reflect on my experience for the day. The reflective journal allowed me to process the interviews and observations as well as the overall day. The additional processing time provided me the opportunity to express my feelings and be authentic about the data collection process.

Participant Questionnaire

A participant questionnaire (Appendix F) was given to each student participant prior to the one-on-one interview and focus group to complete, and they brought the questionnaire to the interview. The information gathered from the questionnaire consisted of the following items: first and last name, academic classification, major, hometown, age, pseudonym, race and ethnicity, gender, explanation of their participation in the sister circle, student organization involvement, indicate if participating in the sister circle influences their decision to remain at the institution, and day and time best for them to be interviewed. This questionnaire helped me understand the participant more and allowed them to provide additional information before the interview that I expanded upon during their one-on-one interview and focus group.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis process utilized in this study was thematic analysis, which centers on findings themes and patterns within the data (Glesne, 2016). Glesne (2016) emphasized, “The goal of thematic analysis is to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of some social phenomenon as well as the perceptions, values, and beliefs of people toward it” (p. 184). Along with thematic analysis, I used Black feminist thought as a lens

to analyze the data, looking for the elements of BWC needing safe spaces and finding a voice, in which Black womyn can speak freely among Black womyn with similar feelings without fear of judgment. The data analysis process started for me at the collection of data as a way to connect with the data. Within qualitative data, it is critical to “find points of congruence and similarity” (Thomas, 2016).

This thematic analysis occurred when I reviewed the one-on-one interviews, focus group interview, observation, and document review. Part of thematic analysis started with the coding of the data, in which I conducted the first cycle of coding from the initial data chunks (Saldaña, 2014). Within the first cycle of coding, I reviewed the one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews by open coding using Nvivo and descriptive coding. The open coding process helped me highlight specific and recurring words or phrases in the data. Saldaña (2014) noted Nvivo coding can be helpful to “beginning qualitative researchers learning how to code data and studies that prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (p. 74). Descriptive coding “assigns labels to data,” which allowed me to summarize the data into words or short phrases (Saldaña, 2014, p. 74). I utilized the memos during the interviews and observations to open coding process as well. From this coding process, I developed a list of codes and continued to analyze the codes to gain a deeper interpretation of the interviews and observations. After the open coding process, I used a priori codes for BFT, Campus Racial Climate, and Impact of Sense of Belonging. The a priori codes utilized for BFT were Self-Definition/Valuation, Interlocking Systems of Oppression, and Importance of African-American Womyn’s Culture. Collins (1986) explained self-definition/valuation,

Self-valuation stresses the content of Black women's self-definitions—namely, replacing externally-derived images with authentic Black women's self-definitions challenges the content of externally defined controlling images self-definition challenges the political knowledge validation process that has resulted in externally-defined, stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood. (p. S17)

Regarding interlocking systems of oppression, Collins declared, “The oppression experienced by most Black women is shaped by their subordination in an array of either/or dualities”(p. S20). Dill (1983) stated the importance of African American Womyn culture: “A supportive feeling of loyalty and attachment to other women stemming from a shared feeling of oppression—has been an important part of Black women's culture” (p. 132).

Hurtado (1992) noted campus racial climate focuses on the specific and intentional effort placed on changing the climate toward inclusion on campus for students of color. The a priori code used for CRC—Institutional Responsibility was Intentional Action/Change. The a priori codes used for Impact of Sense of Belonging were Community and Support. Once I selected the a priori codes, I coded the interviews again using a priori codes.

Next, I conducted the second cycle of coding, pattern coding, which “pulls together a lot of material from first cycle coding and a priori coding into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis” (Saldaña, 2014, p. 86). The pattern coding allowed for larger data to be synthesized into small units of analysis. During the coding process, I created a map of the pattern codes “to lay out the component codes that got you the pattern—along with segments from the field notes” (Saldaña, 2014, p. 88).

After this process, the significant codes appeared as well as the emergent themes, which allowed me to have a clearer understanding of the categories and themes, allowing for a deeper analytic process. There were five themes that emerged from the data, and I reviewed all the codes and placed them according to the pattern coding. All 81 codes found during open coding and the a priori coding process were placed within the themes connected to the code. After the themes were selected, I reviewed the documents that were connected to each theme, and each document was matched according to the theme. The same process occurred when reviewing the observation, specific parts of the observation were identified and then connected to the theme that matched. After the first and second coding cycles were conducted, I used the codes and themes to interpret the findings.

Methods for Trustworthiness

Among the numerous methods for trustworthiness in qualitative research, triangulation (analysis of multiple forms of data in connection with each other) was vital to discern individuals' lived experiences. Merriam (2016) explained triangulation as “using multiple sources of data means comparing and cross-checking data collected through observations at different times or in different places, or interview data collected from people with different perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same people” (p. 216). In addition to triangulation of the data, I engaged numerous additional methods for trustworthiness.

Shenton (2004) explained various elements that contribute to trustworthiness in qualitative research, and within this study, I employed reflective commentary and

member checks. Reflective commentary allowed for on-the-spot impression of interviews, observations, and other data sources. This process also recorded any developing patterns that emerged in the research (Shenton, 2004). My memos during data collection allowed me to have a reflection process to “record the researcher’s initial impressions of each data collection session, patterns appearing to emerge in the data collected and theories generated” (Shenton, 2004, p. 68). The memo process also served as another element to include in my findings and showed the development of the study and my ability to report it.

Member checks was another element of trustworthiness that I included in the study. For all the womyn participating in my study, I wanted to ensure that I held true to their words and experiences, and the most credible way for that to occur was through member checks. Shenton (2004) noted, “Checks relating to the accuracy of the data may take place ‘on the spot’ in the course, and at the end of data collection dialogues” (p. 68). After data collection, I provided themes to the students and administrators interviewed to review their transcripts to ensure they felt I captured their voice and experiences.

Since my topic concerned the impact of a support program and a population of womyn who historically have not been considered valued (Collins, 2002), I felt it imperative to create rapport and familiarity with the organization (i.e., sister circle program administrators) before the start of data collection. Shenton (2004) affirmed, “This may be achieved via consultation of appropriate documents and preliminary visits to the organization themselves” (p. 65). Within my study, this occurred with prior dialogue about the program with the sister circle program administrator about the study,

the introductory video, and meeting the student participants before and during the sister circle general meeting.

The last element of trustworthiness I incorporated was peer scrutiny of my study. Shenton (2004) explained that “opportunities for scrutiny of the project by colleagues, peers, and academics should be welcomed, as should feedback offered to the researcher at any presentations (e.g., at conferences) that are made over the duration of the project” (p. 67). I had a peer debriefer examine my data sources along with my transcripts to engage a different perspective. Having all these aspects of trustworthiness was vital as a researcher, and I believe within this study I ensured they were executed throughout the research process.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I explained the research design for the study, utilizing case study as the methodology to understand the impact of sister circles on the experiences of BWC at a PWI. The research site and participant recruitment procedures were explained. In addition, the three sources of data were presented: interviews (one-on-one interviews and a focus group), documentation review, and observation. Last, I explained thematic analysis as the method of analysis, which presented codes and themes that emerged from the data. In addition, Nvivo and descriptive coding was presented as the main analysis of the data for the sister circle program and the experience of BWC. The findings from the data analysis are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The aim of this study was to understand how institutions create climates that nurture sister circle programs for Black womyn collegians (BWC) at a predominantly White institution (PWI). A case study method was utilized to examine and understand how institutions create climates that nurture sister circle programs for BWC to develop, succeed, and persist at PWI. The guiding research question of the study was: How do institutions create climates that nurture sister circles for Black womyn collegians to develop, succeed, and persist at PWI?

Within this chapter, I provide the findings from the study. First, I discuss my participant sample to help the reader gain a better understanding of participants. Next, I discuss the emergent themes found within the participant interviews, documentation review, and observation. The emergent themes were: (a) Spaces for Sisterhood, (b) Sense of Belonging, (c) Campus Agents, and (d) Intentional Institutional Inclusion.

Participants

All of the student participants within the study were either a general member or executive board member of the sister circle program. These young womyn were vibrant and willing to share their experiences on campus and be vulnerable. The class status of the students ranged from freshman to senior, including six freshmen, three sophomores, and one senior. The majors of the students included fashion merchandising, fashion (general), biology pre-med, and exploratory. (See Table 4.2 for information on the student participants.) The administrator participants, who worked within the division of

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, included the vice president of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, associate vice president of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and the assistant director of the Student Multicultural Center (SMC) and advisor to the sister circle. (See Table 4.3 for information on the administrator participants.)

Table 4.2

Student Participant Demographic Table

Name	Class Year	Major	Hometown	Race/ Ethnicity	Sister Circle Affiliation	Reason for Joining	Sister Circle Retention Impact
Michele	Freshman	Fashion Merchandising	Greenbelt, MD	Black/AA	General Member	Connect with WOC on a deeper level	Makes me feel like I belong
ESI	Freshman	Biology, Pre- Med	Cleveland, OH	Black/AA	General Member	A home	Having people who I identify with on the same mission as me
Jada	Freshman	Fashion (General)	Cleveland, OH	Black/AA	General Member	Power, strength, community, support	Was not sure if there was support for me as a WOC
Ryan	Freshman	Exploratory	Pittsburgh, PA	Black/AA	General Member	A place of comfort to be uplifted and supported	Those in sister circle inspired me to stay
Renee	Freshman	Exploratory	Cincinnati, OH	Black/AA	General Member	Sisterhood, a sense of community	Being able to confide in other WOC
Marie	Freshman	Exploratory	Columbus, OH	Latinx/ Dominican	General Member	Safe space on campus; I can speak my mind	Being with other SOC feels like home
T	Sophomore	Fashion Merchandising	Brownstown, MI	Black/AA	Executive Board	Community and support	I feel, I belong
Y'Lana	Sophomore	Fashion Merchandising	Cleveland, OH	Black/AA	Executive Board	Unity among WOC	I feel loved, like genuinely
Eve	Sophomore	Fashion Merchandising	Louisa, VA	Black/AA	Executive Board	A sense of community	Accountability, close friends, encouragement
Mauri	Senior	Fashion Merchandising	Cleveland, OH	Black/AA	Executive Board	Black community connection	Safe space, welcoming

Table 4.3

Administrator Participant Demographic Table

Name	Office/Department	Title	Connection to Sister Circle Program
Administrator A	Women's Center	Assistant Director	Collaborator
Administrator B	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	Vice-President	Senior-Level Administrator
Administrator D	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	Associate Vice-President	Direct Administrator
Administrator W	Student Multicultural Center	Assistant Director	Advisor

Site of Study

The racial demographics of Hope State University's (HSU) undergraduate student population is 77.1% White, 7.7% African-American or Black, 3.7% multi-racial, 3.5% international, 3.3% Hispanic or Latinx, 1.4 % Asian, 0.2% Native American or Alaskan Native, 0.1 %, Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 2.9 % did not identify race. The racial representation of the graduate population is 65.9 % White, 16.6% international, 5.6 % African-American or Black, 2.8% Asian, 2.6% Hispanic or Latinx, 1.4 % multi-racial, 0.2% Native American or Alaskan Native, 0.0% Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 4.9% did not identify race (Hope State University, 2018). It is important to note the racial representation of Hope State University to provide an understanding of BWC and their representation or lack of representation on campus.

The sister circle program was created out of the university diversity initiatives in an effort to create coordinated diverse student support. The goal of the sister circle

program at HSU is to provide strong support for womyn of color and focus on social, cultural, and personal development.

Emergent Themes

After collecting data at HSU and analyzing the data, four themes emerged about how institutions create a climate that nurtures the sister circle program for BWC at PWI. The emergent themes were: (a) Spaces for Sisterhood, (b) Sense of Belonging, (c) Campus Agents, and (d) Intentional Institutional Inclusion.

Spaces for Sisterhood

Upon arriving on campus at HSU to collect data, I started by observing the sister circle general meeting. The sister circle program meets in the Student Multicultural Center (SMC) weekly and serves as a space for sisterhood. All the student and administrator participants explained the importance of the SMC as the physical space for students of color and BWC. When asked about how the sister circle program impacts their experience, the participants frankly spoke about the importance of having space just for BWC and for sisterhood. Michele shared,

I feel it's a good place, a judge-free zone. If you just want to express yourself, it doesn't matter. You can be yourself and be open about our experiences on campus as a Black community of womyn. So, I think it's important just to have an outlet for us to talk about anything and also have activities to keep us connected.

Many of the young womyn explained how the institution providing a space just for them allowed the ability to feel safe, uplift one another to develop, and build relationships. Michele's response was similar to the other womyn: They all reaffirmed how having a positive space/outlet for them to be themselves was needed. The regular use of the SMC

as a space for students of color and sisterhood was proven by the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion annual report. The use of the SMC had increased every year since 2015, with 5,600 students utilizing the center in 2018. Given the increase over the years and the number of students who use the SMC, it is clear that space is important for students of color, especially sister circle members.

The administrators echoed the same feelings about the sister circle program being a space for BWC to be their full authentic selves and develop holistically. Administrator W noted,

So, when I think about developing, having this opportunity to come together and encourage either as women of color and help each other and support each other. And depending on where they're coming from, that might have been something that was frowned upon or not encouraged in those respective areas. So, being able to develop in that way and actually understand sisterhood is important, and what that means and how it's displayed, especially when you think about the current media images of Black women, it's a difference.

Administrator W touched on how the sister circle program provides BWC the ability to develop personally and collectively within sisterhood. The development that occurs within the sister circle program helps to combat the negative images about Black womyn.

Throughout the interviews, the young womyn stressed the comfort they felt in having a space for the sister circle program and how attending the weekly Monday meetings provided a sense of relief. Y'Lana affirmed,

It makes me feel great! I guess when things like that passive aggressiveness with White people. And, you know, you're gonna have some type of interaction. I guess on Mondays you can just come and just be uplifted because at sister circle you will feel that—uplifted. You will say, "I don't care what I just went through. I don't care what I'm going through. There are people here for me, and there are people that look like me and who go through things just like me." We can talk about, "Oh, girl,

guess what happened today? Girl, guess what happened to me too!” Just that sisterhood! It’s a great feeling!

Y’Lana, like the other womyn, explained how powerful and inspiring the Monday sister circle meetings were because they provided them with an opportunity to reflect and inspire each other. Jada shared that attending the sister circle meetings was a release from the week for her and the importance of being hyped up by other BWC at the meeting. For Jada, the sister circle meeting is a safe space and the place where she is told she can do anything in the world. The feeling of empowerment and excitement was definitely present during my observation of the sister circle general meeting.

The sister circle general meeting is the essence of the importance of spaces for sisterhood. The meeting served as a place for empowerment, vulnerability, and an opportunity for BWC to feel their full authentic selves. Each week during the general meeting, there is a planned activity for the BWC to develop and feel empowered; during my observation, the activity was an action plan for the spring semester. The action plan activity provided an opportunity for the BWC in the sister circle program to envision their spring semester and the goals they wanted to accomplish. Additionally, the activity encouraged BWC to create accountability groups to have more direction and support in achieving the goals they set.

The students and administrators provided many examples of the importance of and their appreciation for the fact that space existed for BWC and for a sisterhood to be created and grow. Although many of the students and administrators spoke of their excitement and value in having a space for BWC and sisterhood, they also expressed many challenges on campus, mostly in class with racism.

When asked about the oppression they experienced on campus, the students took a while to think of examples. I explained that subtle racism would be appropriate examples, and they exclaimed, “Oh yea, we have a lot of examples of that.” It was interesting that when asked about the oppression they experienced, they mostly searched for overt oppressive experiences, which may connect to how they are socialized to think about and understand racism. Many of the students shared many subtle and overt incidents of oppression they faced whether on campus or off-campus, which shed a light on the campus racial climate. The campus climate executive summary document provided the data to support narrative BWCs explained in the study.

The in-class experiences for BWC seemed to be a prominent issue that they discussed. Jada explained her in-class experience of being physically isolated by her White peers and the devastating impact that has on her as a BWC on campus. Jada noted,

I started noticing in my lecture halls that when I sit next to someone Caucasian, they start to move their things over. And I’m like, “I’m not gonna steal your stuff.” And then, it’s like they shift their whole body whole over. Do you want me to move?

Jada’s experience was similar to some of the other BWC in the interviews because they all shared a variation of Jada’s story occurring to them in class. As these BWC vulnerably explained the challenges they faced in class, you could hear them masking the hurt they felt each day. Many students shared examples of feeling isolated in class and being treated negatively by White students. The in-class versus the out-of-class version of HSU is drastically different for BWC, and these experiences are part of the reason spaces for sisterhood are needed. Renee asserted,

I'm the only Black person here, and it just makes it weird. And it makes you feel like you have to prove yourself and work just as hard so they don't look at you funny. You know, assume that you're not a good student.

Renee along with the other BWC noted the need to prove their "intelligence" in class not only because they were the only one but also due to their need to show White students they deserved to be at HSU. The in-class experience the BWC provided connects to the findings from the campus climate summary, which declared students of color do not feel comfortable on campus and with the classroom climate. As the data explained, students of color experience exclusionary, intimidating, offensive, and/or hostile conduct. These findings prove having spaces for sisterhood at HSU for BWC is vital, and the data provides additional evidence of the need.

For the BWC in the study, a feeling of being invisible and not accounted for permeated their interviews. Collectively, the BWC shared times when they felt invisible mentally and physically. Ryan explained that many times on the elevator on campus, White students stood directly in front of her as if they did not see her. She was confused about how she was invisible to them since she is five feet and six inches tall, making it impossible for her not to be seen. The frustration the BWC showed as they explained these incidents was overwhelming and seemed to be a regular occurrence for them on campus. Administrator D affirmed,

They're an invisible population in some ways, so when I think they get grouped into White women, which is problematic, especially when you think in terms of, like, the Women's March and feminist movements, and so we, you know, that's very well documented, but there's also needs that are unique and different that I anecdotally can observe and see. For the last

20 years, I've reported to two Black women. Like, you know, those are deep relationships that I have. I can watch where we'll walk into a room and not only someone look at you, and you get the impact of race, the visible, but also the identity of female, so you get diminished immediately. I've watched this, right? How do you navigate that? You know?

The picture Administrator D shared of the invisibility of BWC on campus and in society was from her lens as a White womyn in these spaces and the relationships she has with BWC at HSU. The intersectional component of BWC identity is important to note; however, during this study the BWC highlighted more incidents due to their Blackness rather than their womyness. The concept of being seen as invisible has become a norm for some of the BWC on campus, which provides a sense of acceptance for things out of their control.

For most of the BWC, these oppressive behaviors were salient within the classroom, but for others, they experienced these behaviors in other areas of campus.

Renee shared,

I was on the ground, and my nose was just bleeding. So, I had to go to the health center after that and just went to get a checkup and stuff because I got sick. And the nurse was asking me the question: "Are taking drugs alcohol, whatever?" And I was like, "no," and she just looked me weird. Like I was like, "I don't smoke. I don't have sex, like what? Like, are you surprised? Why'd you just look at me like that?" I was "okkkkkk." It just made me so salty cuz I was like, no, she didn't just look at me like that. I didn't say anything, so I'm not surprised.

At that moment, Renee was at the health center, a place for her to get care, but she was met with oppressive behavior that should not have occurred. Renee was judged because she did not fit the image of a BWC the nurse thought she should. Her response was "I'm not surprised," meaning she had normalized these types of incidents.

Eve was another BWC who explained her feelings of isolation and being the only one at her campus job with catering services. She was the only person of color within the whole catering staff, and she felt the weight of it when attending events and feeling like a racial object to be picked at. Eve shared that people take pictures of her and ask to touch her hair as if they have never seen a Black person before. She also observed that when diversity events are scheduled, she always knows she will be on the schedule that week for those events, which she attempted to brush off, but when asked if it bothered her, she said, “It’s like, I mean, it’s not something I think about. But it’s just, like, kind of annoying at times.” She acknowledged that it did bother her, and I felt it was possible this was the first time she may have outwardly admitted how much it bothered her.

Many of the BWC utilized phrases such as “used to it,” “brush it off,” “not surprised” when they described oppressive behavior and their reactions to oppressive incidents they encountered. When asked about how they react to oppressive incidents, many of them shared the fear of being viewed as the “angry Black womyn” and how that impacted their level of reaction or lack of reaction at all. Y’Lana shared,

When I voice my opinion, I shouldn’t be aggressive or, you know, an angry Black womyn. Like no! I actually have an opinion, and you’re actually making me feel some kind of way, and if I can’t speak on it, then it’s like, well, why am I here?

For the BWC, a moment of reflection or self-awareness occurred when reacting to these oppressive incidents because reacting in a certain way means they can be labeled as the angry Black womyn. Y’Lana, as did the other BWC, feared reacting and voicing their opinion to the oppressive incidents would make them the villain. Understanding the crossroads BWC at HSU faced when it comes to reacting to

oppressive incidents makes it even more vital to have spaces for sisterhood.

When participants were asked how they handled oppressive incidents, Y'Lana shared,

Yeah, I don't even do anything. I mean, for real like when things like that happen. I come back to the Student Multicultural Center and talk about it. Or I go back to my roommate and say, "Girl, guess what just happened to me?" So, like, it's like things like that. I don't really like say things on the spot. I just kind of keep it to myself and be like, "Oh, aight, that just happened." Just keep going about my day.

Y'Lana provided the importance of spaces such as the SMC and sister circle for BWC to have as support and a constant space for sisterhood. Beyond the oppressive incidents, microaggressions, and isolation, the BWC at HSU overwhelmingly just want to feel accounted for and thought of within the institution. Mauri voiced her frustration: "I just get annoyed knowing that most of the time, I'm not being accounted for. So, I go somewhere [SMC] I'm accounted for." Even when these BWC were bombarded with isolation and invisibility, they found solace in the SMC and, most importantly, the sister circle. The vitalness of institutions having spaces for sisterhood provides the ability to feel empowered, appreciated, accounted for and seen, which is all BWC want at the end of the day.

Sense of Belonging

The sister circle program at HSU provided a place of comfort and community for BWC on campus. The concept of sense of belonging for the BWC at HSU encompassed belonging, home away from home, feel secure/sense of security, and togetherness. The feeling of belonging was expressed as the BWC described or explained how the sister

circle program made them feel. Renee explained, “Especially with sister circle and the SMC period, like, they provide a lot of support for me, and they made me feel like I belong here. And I know that I can count on them for anything.”

For these BWC, having a place to belong was an indicator of comfort, and having the sister circle program allowed for that feeling to be present on campus. Many referred to the sister circle and the SMC as a home away from home. Marie noted, “The more I’m here, the more I find people that are more like me, people I connect with, and it’s starting to feel more like a home away from home.” The simple yet formidable phrase “home away from home” is so important for BWC because on a PWI campus, they do not generally feel “at home,” so to find a space that connects to you is priceless. Mauri shared how special the sister circle program was for belonging:

So, I feel like sister circle, it’s just where people come to. I think it helps with the progression of being away from home, my home away from home for a lot of people and like a safe place. We had a lot of sessions when people have let out a lot of things that they’ve been holding in from childhood. I felt the type of connection that they had in sister circle, just knowing that you are my sister. And even though I don’t even know you, but we are in this together because I know that you’re going through the same thing I’m going through. It forms a certain type of connection that’s really special.

Mauri provided an understanding that for BWC who experience the sister circle, it helped their transition to college life and was a safe place. There was this sense of comfort that occurred in sister circle that mimics how you feel at home that was so crucial for BWC. As I observed during the sister circle general meeting, it embodied what sense of belonging can mean for BWC. All students were welcomed, and the atmosphere, especially for BWC, allowed for them to be together as one and be their full authentic

selves. The activity during this general meeting allowed them to utilize each other and other resources on campus to be successful during the semester. Throughout the meeting, there was a feeling of comfort and togetherness that connected directly to their sense of belonging.

In addition to belonging, the BWC explained the sister circle program created a sense of security for them on campus. The campus climate summary provides a better understanding of the experiences of BWC on campus. Within it, BWC expressed that they were not comfortable with the overall campus climate and experienced exclusionary conduct in the classroom or academic environment. This campus climate summary serves as an opportunity to identify and improve the experience of BWC. Since BWC do not feel comfortable on campus, it was important for sister circle and other resources on campus to provide security for BWC. Administrator B shared the importance of security for BWC on campus,

Well, security. You know, a lot of times we don't think about security, but when you're out there in the midst of these people that are different from yourself, you feel like you're by yourself, and so it helps our students to feel secure. When you feel secure, you feel like you're not afraid, and you know how to stand up for yourself, and you know what to say, who to talk to, where to go. You have answers! Security gives you answers! Security gives you a foundation that's unshakable. Security helps you feel like you're part of something that's bigger than yourself, and you never have to be alone. Security gives you this way of positive thinking that things will happen in a good way for you.

The words shared by Administrator B were profound because many of the BWC felt alone at many points on campus and having the sister circle as a space of security was vital. Overwhelmingly, the BWC in the interview used the phrases “safe space” and “feeling secure” as they described the sister circle. The BWC and Administrator B

touched on an important element for anyone, feeling secure, which many take for granted but it is very necessary.

All of the student participants felt as a BWC on campus they had resources to support them, which they expressed as critical to their experience. One of the first parts of having a sense of belonging connects to the resources available to you. The sister circle program was one of the main resources for the BWC at HSU, but ESI shared some other resources,

Especially because of sister circle and because of the Women's Center, like, they have a lot of events where they try to really enforce that women of color get together, and we do good activities where we get to know each other. We get to just be vulnerable with each other, and you create great friendships, so they definitely, like, enforce that connection between us. Just because of the community I have built, like, I feel comfortable here. I feel like I have a lot of resources. I have a lot of connections and a lot of networks, and I feel like they'll help me and shape me to where I want to be and who I want to be.

ESI provided a deeper understanding of how having resources can impact BWC and their development at a PWI. She identified resources for BWC as an opportunity to grow and be shaped into the BWC she wanted to become. Mauri asserted BWC have additional resources beyond the SMC and the Women's Center. However, she explained being involved in the SMC gave BWC the opportunity to branch out beyond the SMC to other possibilities on campus.

Jada explained she appreciated the resources and support at HSU more after speaking with a friend at another PWI,

For me, I started asking my other friends that go to other PWI, and they would say, "We don't have programs like that at our school." See, I was going to leave, and then I'm like, "Aww, but I can't leave this!" My friend said if they are going through something... if I don't have any friends or

something like that. It's just me. When they told me they don't have programs like that at their school, it's sad because we should, right? So, this is probably my best bet to stay here 'cause I feel as though I have support here.

The story Jada shared was very touching because the sister circle program at HSU for the BWC on campus is normal to them. However, after Jada spoke with her friends at other PWI, it became very apparent that not all BWC have a sister circle program or the support HSU has for BWC. This transported me back to the first day I arrived on campus at HSU and met with some of the sister circle executive board members and explained my study and how special the sister circle at HSU was. Many of the executive board members looked surprised that I was interested in studying the sister circle program, and it caught me off guard for a moment. However, after I processed my conversation with them, I realized that the sister circle program was a norm for these BWC because they do not know anything different. Jada's story hit the nail on the head about why sister circle programs are vital and needed at every PWI for BWC. Once PWI has a sister circle program, it will become the norm.

The understanding of sticking together and being in the experience together were phrases that were constantly shared by the participants. The idea that we are in this together made the BWC feel stronger, Y'Lana declared the significance of sticking together as BWC at a PWI: "We need to stick together just cause of the culture." Many of the BWC shared the importance of sticking together as BWC and a Black community on campus because "we all we got," as one of them stated. Marie affirmed,

I had a math class. It's not the math course you're supposed to take as a freshman. A lot of people in there were like, older. So, it was a lot of White people, and on the first day, I saw one girl that looked like me. And

I looked at her and she looked at me.. And I realized she did Kupita/Transciones, so after that, we sat next to each other every day, did math homework together. So, it was kind of like, even though we were the only ones, we still stuck together.

Marie explained she knew the other BWC in her class from the pre-orientation program, which allowed her to feel connected to another BWC in a class of mostly White students. The two of them sticking together provided a sense of belonging in class for Marie. The essence of sticking together for students of color and BWC was stressed within the pre-orientation program Kupita/Transciones and created a sense of belonging for BWC when they stepped foot on campus. Renee expressed the importance of seeing other Black students on campus and what that sense of comfort feels like, saying, “We both got this pigment to our skin, so we in this together.” “We in this together” or “we stick together” was said throughout many of the interviews. The BWC at HSU felt being together was key to their sense of belonging on campus.

Sense of belonging directly connects to retention because students who feel engaged by the institution generally do not want to leave. However, a negative climate can attribute to low retention for BWC at PWI (Kelly et al., 2017; Miller, 2017; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). The sister circle program was an initiative to improve the experiences of BWC at HSU and retain more BWC. When BWC were asked what made them want to stay at HSU, many first shared academics or their major, then their next answer was the sister circle program. Much of their reason for staying was attributed to the Kupita/Transciones pre-orientation program, then their connection to sister circle. They also shared the

lack of diversity within the June summer registration program impacted if they would attend the institution. Meeting administrators from the SMC and learning about the pre-orientation program helped change their experience at the summer registration.

Therefore, the answer was two-fold, and the impact of one program naturally made them aware of the sister circle and solely aided in them staying at HSU. This is so critical for PWI to understand because it can be a key factor in helping BWC find their sense of belonging within the institution and as a community.

The participants attributed much of their sense of belonging to the sister circle and SMC as spaces for the foundational components to their experience. However, outside of the sister circle and the SMC, their sense of belonging was still present across campus and in other offices such as the women's center. For institutions ensuring BWC have the elements of belonging it's crucial to creating a better experience for them inside and outside of the classroom.

Campus Agents

For BWC to feel connected on campus, many elements have a positive impact on their experience. Campus agents, specifically those of color such as university administrators, staff, and faculty, provide the opportunity for BWC to build relationships, see the representation of womyn of color leaders on campus, and be invested and empowered by these relationships. All of the student participants shared the importance

of interacting and building relationships with campus agents and how they felt invested in and were inspired by these womyn.

Whether in class or on campus, the BWC shared having campus agents represent people of color mattered to them. Ryan explained how impactful the Black womyn administrator who taught her first-year Black experience course was. Ryan asserted, “She’s best, Dean Baton. She’s amazing, and it was because Dean Baton created such an environment where it was, like, we all want to get 4.0, we all want to help each other academically.” The excitement in Ryan and Jada’s voices about the Black experience course was glowing because they both shared how much they learned about themselves and how vital it was to have a Black administrator teaching them. They spoke of a trip to Detroit to see the Black History Museum they took during the course and how much they learned about Africa and slavery. Ryan felt it was a strong bonding experience and learned how strong Black people were with fewer resources. Overall, the Black experience course provided an additional connection for BWC through being taught by a Black womyn faculty member. Not many Black womyn faculty were mentioned by the BWC in the interviews, but they did share the relationships they have built with Black womyn administrators. The university diversity initiatives related to campus agents speak to diversifying and retaining faculty training and diversity recruitment. Both initiatives encourage the institution to have a focused effort to recruit and retain faculty of color. Diversity faculty support is another initiative that provides faculty with support for teaching, research, and advancement.

Administrator A shared the importance of representation for BWC on campus when it comes to campus agents of color. She explained after an event for Black faculty, staff, and administrators, a BWC student intern was shocked to see so many campus agents of color.

And she walked up to me and said, “I’ve never seen that many Black faculty and staff in my life since I’ve been here!” And she was a senior! So just the beauty in that, to see there are people here in high places that look like you. Imagery is so important.

The BWC was not aware of the campus agents of color, and Administrator A was spot on when she expressed imagery being important and needed. With more awareness of campus agents of color, BWC have the ability and the option to build a relationship with faculty, staff, and administrators. The administrator participants wanted to see more BWC interact with and be aware of the other Black faculty besides the SMC staff for the opportunity to expand beyond the SMC and learn from other faculty and staff of color.

Administrator W declared,

More awareness of Black faculty, staff, and administrators on campus is needed because sometimes I think they believe it. It just might be, you know, the people in the Student Multicultural Center, but they’re actually spread throughout campus. So, we do have a good mixture of women of color, in particular Black women. So, I would say that maybe more opportunities that are specifically for Black women that’s external to the division of Diversity, Equity Inclusion or even just programs that are maybe not specific to Black women, but I guess a sense of belonging in those other spaces so that they can be involved in different opportunities to get that leadership development.

The ability to develop and build relationships with campus agents of color allows BWC to feel supported and connected to the institution. All of the student participants spoke

highly of the SMC staff and how supportive and influential they have been in their experience on campus.

Campus agents of color also provided BWC with the comfort of connecting and confiding in another Black womyn. Many of the BWC shared if and when oppressive incidents occurred, they were more likely to reach out to a Black womyn as a campus resource to help them. Michele asserted that she would reach out to her Residence Hall Director who is a Black womyn if she had any issues on campus and confide in her. All of the BWC in the interviews gloated about the SMC staff and how much they love and appreciate their presence and involvement in their experience on campus. Eve shared how she felt supported by the SMC staff,

I would say support is having someone to talk to like Administrator W or Dr. D. Me, preferably, I want to talk to a woman of color about my issues about something, but also if it's not, like, faculty or staff, I've talked to them about having accountability partners for things. So yeah. I always come to rant to Administrator W, and she's very soft spoken about things. And it's better because sometimes I wouldn't say I'm getting myself in trouble, but I rather say something to her than, say, to my friends, who would say, "Okay, ya do it," where Administrator W would say, "E, you know better." So, I'm just like, "Okay, I will not do it."

Eve and the other BWC expressed feeling more comfortable with campus agents of color, especially Black womyn. Eve and many of the other BWC referenced Administrator W, who is the advisor of the sister circle program. During the sister circle general meeting observation, she provided support and guidance for the executive board and the general sister circle members. During the meeting, the advisor took more of a backseat and allowed the executive board members to run the meeting and served as a resource for all the BWC during the meeting and after. As a BWC there is a sense of connection and

affinity to other Black womyn, and being at a PWI, seeing a Black womyn in leadership provides a feeling of relief and solace.

All of the BWC referenced at least one or more campus agents who have greatly impacted their experience at HSU. The administrators in the study spoke of the significance these relationships have on BWC. Administrator A affirmed,

I think that through our program and how we have Kupita and stuff, where we bring students early, and we help them to develop a community. I think that as long as our students can find their sense of belonging, they really belong. Especially if they can land, like, in the SMC or over here [Women's Center] or one of our diversity centers, they really feel like they have a home away from home because I think our staff definitely tries to provide that family-type atmosphere. So, we're giving out hugs, we check in, we ask about the boo, you know what I'm saying?

Like the other administrators in the study, Administrator W explained how the relationships they created with BWC on campus provided security and a sense of belonging. All the administrators shared how much they cherish and value the BWC and the ability to build relationships to help them develop and grow into the students they want to be. Campus agents of color inspire and empower BWC even when they may not believe in themselves. Mauri shared how campus agents have empowered her when she did not feel she was doing her best.

So not only is it somewhere for you to get answers, but it's also someone that you confide in. They remind me a lot of times when I feel like maybe I'm the smallest person in the class. I'm like, "Bruh, I'm the only Black girl. I'm salty, upset." They're like, "Yeah, but you're still doing phenomenal in your classes. You're still mentoring," and they remind you of all the great things you're doing, especially for the people that look like you.

For Mauri, having a campus agent uplift her and continually remind her of her greatness was so powerful! She knows this campus agent of color sees value in her as a person and

the work she is doing on campus, and for BWC, that moment of empowerment and recognition is all they need to push through.

Campus agents aid BWC in various capacities on campus, but a major influence is just their presence on campus and interaction with BWC. ESI asserted,

I feel like I'm represented well here. We have Black women that are in higher positions here. It gives me like that extra push, like that drive. Like, I can do this, or I can do that. I see people that do it that look just like me.

ESI saw campus agents of color as an inspiration to achieve because they were in high-level leadership positions. The other BWC shared that representation on campus through campus agents was needed and appreciated, especially at a PWI.

Campus agents are very valuable to the lives of BWC, and the BWC at HSU definitely saw the importance of their presence and impact. The student participants and administrators at HSU understood how critical campus agents are and the need to increase interaction and awareness of agents of color on campus to improve the experience of BWC.

Intentional Institutional Inclusion

Intentional institutional inclusion is comprised of the following elements: moving in the right direction toward inclusion, intentional programs/initiatives for BWC, intentional programs/initiatives with diversity as a priority, crafted spaces for BWC, intentional funding, and moving beyond sympathy to empathy. When asked about the campus racial climate, the BWC and administrators at HSU were candid about the issues present on campus, describing the climate as segregated, “the blizzard,” uncomfortable, tense, overt racism, subtle racism, used to whiteness, and overwhelmed by whiteness.

The campus climate summary serves as a key component in understanding the current climate of the institution. Knowing the current climate allows for strategic action when it comes to intentional institutional inclusion. The campus climate summary explains that students, faculty, and staff from underrepresented groups are not comfortable with the climate and experience exclusionary, intimidating, and offensive and/or hostile conduct at the institution. Although the results show many areas for improvement, it is important as an institution to be vulnerable and ready to make the changes necessary. Hope State University has taken the campus climate results and actively created plans to make changes moving toward intentional inclusion.

In spite of the challenging climate they described, participants all felt strongly and were positive about the direction the institution was moving in reference to creating a more inclusive climate at HSU. Mauri explained,

I feel like it'll change, the racial climate as we go on, it's going to get more diverse, and it'll be more opportunities for students like us. And I feel like they have an environment where they're trying to be as open and inclusive as they can. So, I feel like that has a lot to do with the progression. It's not going to stop. I feel like it's not, like they're battling us as we're trying to get more inclusive, and they are very inclusive. So with that, I think the racial climate will change.

Mauri shared an openness about the shift in the racial climate on campus over time and felt that the institution was not battling the progression but was supportive of the changes.

When asked about the path to inclusion, the BWC expressed the challenges of attending a PWI but felt the institution was taking steps to actively change the racial climate.

Administrator B spoke of the efforts within the division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion related to pushing inclusion forward within the institution. Administrator B asserted,

What I am saying is that there are more and more people who understand the necessity of diverse perspectives, the necessity of students of color, faculty of color, people of color, and the contribution that we make to this great university. So, we know that our efforts are not in vain, but we do feel that things can be better. So how do we drive change throughout the entire university? A lot of it has to do with the fact that diversity, equity, and inclusion touches every area. It's not just for the student part—it's also for faculty, staff, administrators, you know, and we're very intentional about how that works. So being on the President's Cabinet certainly helps a lot. So where my position is as part of the cabinet, diversity is discussed, and implementation of diversity goals are always implemented throughout the entire university.

The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion division provided many of the contributions toward inclusion on campus at HSU, and Administrator B explained the importance of the work being done. However, the work should not only be done by the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion division because this work is important throughout the institution. The administrators and BWC at HSU understand more change has to happen, and that is the first step many institutions do not acknowledge: that more work has to be done.

One administrator in particular spoke about the culturally relevant programming supported by the SMC, encouraging all students to engage in dialogue about race. Administrator W shared,

So, I think to do different things like that, increasing the word and having more conversations about culture and experiences, because I think it's one thing to have the conversation, but I think it's another thing to see it. And we've been able to see that with one of our initiatives within the Student Multicultural Center, discrimination station. So, it's a very interactive

workshop where we have actors and volunteers. The actors are aware of the script, the volunteers are kind of thrown into it, and they have to respond based on their gut, and then we have a conversation and dialogue about it. It's one of our more, I want to say, diverse events? Or events where it's not the majority of people in that room, are not just students of color. And so, then it provides the opportunity to see, like, these things do happen on campus, or I had this thing happen to me. Because you get a combination of people expressing some things that have happened to them personally or their friends. So, I think more conversation and interactive events such as discrimination station allows people to do that. But then I think also including more culturally relevant curriculum within the classroom, and also having training on how to navigate those situations. When some of those, you know, microaggressions, racial words, or tensions occur within the classroom, having training on how to help faculty members navigate those.

Administrator W along with the other administrators and BWC expressed the need for conversations between students of color and White students and in general across campus. I learned from the interviews, whether from the BWC or the administrators, engaging in racial dialogue is a challenge for White students, faculty, and staff. Programs like discrimination station allow for everyone on campus, no matter their racial makeup, to engage in racial conversations and learn more about inclusion at HSU and beyond the campus.

In contrast, Administrator A felt HSU was moving in the right direction but still has a lot of work to do when it comes to systematic change. Administrator A explained,

I think that Hope State does do a good job of, you know, creating that environment, but of course, we can always do better. So that's I just feel like of course we always need more, and I think that sometimes institutions just put band-aids on things without really, like, getting to the root. So, I'm ready for us to actually to get to the root and really cause a real systematic change, like yes, having a sister circle is beautiful, but how about we change the system so that we won't need to talk about it?

Administrator A touched on the core issue of many PWI when it comes to issues of racism and negative campus climate. Hope State University was ready to move forward toward inclusion, but wanting systematic change is the overall key when it comes to inclusion.

Administrator B provided a look into the past and present of HSU and the foundational underpinning of diversity at the institution. Its Black student activist group from the 1960s, Black Action Students, set the foundation for the presence of Black students on campus at HSU and the creation of the SMC, which celebrated the 50-year anniversary in 2018.

We really are a predominantly White institution, and so, you'll hear the voice of our White students probably on a broader, bigger scale. However, when our students of color come to Hope State, there is a family here for those students. We have increased our numbers in students, faculty of color, and staff of color here on this campus now. Are we where we need to be? Not quite, but we are so much better than where we were. The one thing about Hope State is now you can feel and see diversity more than you did in the past. It says so much about this university and how diversity became a foundational truth. We may not have had everything we needed, and yes, it was hard, but it never died. The spirit lives here. And, and that's why I think, you know, coming to Hope State as a student of color, you can be highly successful here. Now, is everything perfect? No, but you need to find a way to perfection because the support is there.

Understanding the past, current, and future impact of the SMC at HSU is vital, and it is hopeful to see the progression toward inclusion within the institution. The past activism within HSU has laid the foundation for current and future students of color to continue the fight for inclusion.

All of the student participants were general members or executive board members of the sister circle program, and they shared how vital having the sister circle program

was to them and other BWC at HSU. All the student participants and the administrators referenced the Where Do Black Women Go? Black womyn's initiative housed in the Women's Center as another important program for BWC on campus. Both sister circle and Where Do Black Women Go? are intentional programs and initiatives for BWC that have an in-depth impact on their experience at HSU. Mauri declared sister circle as a place of growth and support, a space for knowing other Black faces on campus, and a starting place for all students of color as they transition on campus. Mauri along with all the BWC shared how they connected to the sister circle program, and for each person, it was part of their first experience on campus. The sister circle program served as a gateway for all the BWC and had a special connection to general members or executive board members. As an initiative, the sister circle program provided a community and support systems for BWC. The sister circle general meeting helped to understand the vitalness of the program. Within the general meeting is a safe space for the BWC who attend and participate in the program. The meeting also created an atmosphere in which BWC belonged and could intentionally grow both as Black womyn and students through activities and community support. The sister circle program was an intentional inclusion effort from the institution to improve and retain BWC.

Administrator A explained the creation and impact of the Where Do Black Women Go? initiative to support BWC at HSU:

Over the past two years, we've intentionally tried to outreach more to our women of color, particularly Black women. When I first came four years ago, they didn't have a big Black student population, like a lot of the Black students didn't come here, and they didn't feel this was a place that they could call home. I wanted women of color to know this was a place for them and they belonged here, and we talked about topics that, you

know, we definitely needed their voices at the table. And like the Women's Center didn't have anything, like, housed here to specifically for like women of color or Black women. We didn't want to seem like we were competing or anything, but more so fill the space that, like, sister circle wasn't filling. So, I worked with our graduate students to develop, Where do Black Women Go, and we really wanted to focus on developing like a village type of community where we bridge faculty, staff, and students. So, some key components about Where Do Black Women Go that make it a little bit different from sister circle. We strategically reach out to faculty and staff members to be on the panel and to be in the room and just kind of like show that cross. We had programs titled, "Where do Black Women go to Cry," "Where do Black Women go to Reclaim their Bodies," "Where do Black Women go to Feel Awkward." So, just talking about those insecure, vulnerable places that Black women have and seeing like, "Oh, I'm 20, and I'm going through this. She's 40, she's been through it," and hearing that cross-generational talking, we all know, like, the importance of storytelling and that bonding and stuff like that. So, this is really creating an atmosphere for that.

The Where do Black Women Go? initiative was meant to specifically support BWC in addition to sister circle but not compete with it because its overall goal was to provide a sense of belonging for every BWC. The hope is to connect Black womyn students, faculty, and staff to bridge communication and allow for relationships to be forged by related experiences. All of the BWC and the administrators referenced the initiative as an additional resource for BWC, which spoke to the impact and need for support at HSU. Intentional institutional inclusion starts with understanding and providing resources for populations in need, and HSU has stepped up to create the spaces needed for BWC on campus.

In addition to intentional programs/initiatives for BWC, HSU has intentional programs/initiatives with diversity as the priority. The administrator participants provided examples of the programs/initiatives with diversity as a priority at HSU, such as campus climate study, employee resource group, university stewards, pre-orientation

program, and the diversity course requirement. The administrators spoke about the HSU campus climate study and how they utilized the findings to improve the campus climate at HSU. Administrator D declared that the climate study conducted a few years ago provided the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion division with actual qualitative and quantitative data to know firsthand what was happening on campus. She explained how fundamental the climate study was to improve the racial climate and give voice to the students, faculty, and staff of color. Administrator B affirmed the program created from the climate study:

We have a program that's straight out of our university strategic plan. It is called "Great Place to Work." It drives all of the information that came out of our climate study, and the way we did the climate study was really, I mean, it was phenomenal. I mean, and just to go into that, you can talk with Administrator D about that because she leads that part of it. She will explain how it is instrumental in university-wide changes. It's phenomenal. So, just talk to her about it. We have one committee that's on race and disability because those were troubled areas for us that we found out in the climate study. And those results, we have a committee that's looking at that and coming out with some recommendations for that area, but there was no stone left unturned.

The creation of "Great Place to Work" was an effort to utilize the data from the climate study to identify the areas of concern. The division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion highlighted race and disability as areas of improvement and focused on getting to the root of these issues. As an institution, HSU leaving no stone unturned when it comes to issues within the climate study was essential and ambitious because it can be an uphill battle. However, HSU valued the feedback from underrepresented students, faculty, and staff and wanted to improve their experiences on campus.

When asked about HSU publishing the climate study, Administrator B explained, “It could be embarrassing for a university to publish their climate study, but we deal with the real thing.” Administrator B showed the authentic nature of HSU and how diversity is a priority. Speaking with Administrator B, I noted many institutions would be nervous to publish their university climate study, and she agreed and explained institutions have to be ready to go there if they want to see intentional change occur. I appreciated her candor because we need more administrators willing and ready to be authentic by any means necessary when it comes to diversity and inclusion.

HSU made inclusion a priority for students as well as for staff and faculty through an officially recognized employee resource for womyn of color. As Administrator A explained, the employee resource group named the Women of Color Collective aimed to navigate and maneuver working at a PWI. It has 65 members, and all of its events were always packed. Administrator A hoped to foster more cross-collaboration between Black womyn across campus. This Women of Color Collective provided support for the faculty and staff of color, which in turn can help them support and empower BWC on campus.

Administrator W shared the impact of the university steward program, which provided students with faculty, staff, or an administrator as a support system to unpack racial incidents that occurred on campus. The university steward program provided students with support when incidents of bias occur. Administrator W stated,

If students experience things, whether good or bad, but typically, you get bad things that they experience on campus. They’re able to come and talk to someone about that and figure out, if one, they just want to vent about it, or if they want some action to take place and then figuring out the next steps from there. So, there have been racial instances that have happened and taken place on campus. Now, will all of our students of color

experience that, you know, probably not. So, it just kind of depends on where you are, what type of things you're involved in, but we do have some I do say, we have something set in place that if students experience those things, they are able to figure out if it's an action step or a venting and trying to figure out how to make sure those things don't happen again.

The university steward program allowed for training and support when bias-related incidents occurred at HSU. This program was an investment for all at the institution and promoted the understanding that if and when bias incidents arise, there was an action plan in place.

All but one of the BWC (who entered as a transfer student) participated in the pre-orientation program Kupita/Transiciones. They all attributed their smooth transition to HSU and positive start to their college experience to the pre-orientation program.

Michele shared how valuable the pre-orientation program was for her as she entered HSU. As a Black womyn, she felt supported and didn't feel thrown to the curb by the institution as a BWC. The pre-orientation program was vital to the SMC and sister circle program because during the orientation program was when BWC and the other students of color were introduced to all the programs within the SMC. Administrator A affirmed,

I think that it definitely feels a void that we definitely need. To walk in a room where people look like you and are embracing you, it is important. And I think that we've done a good job, especially through Kupita because when we get them all in Kupita, we do a good job of saying when you see somebody smile at them, hug them. We're a family.

The positive impact and influence of Kupita/Transiciones was unmatched when it comes to the power of creating a community and sense of belonging for BWC. Each BWC shared that their experience would not have been the same without the Kupita/Transiciones program. Coming out of the Kupita/Transiciones program there was

a strong bond created with BWC, and they felt empowered to take on HSU as a community of BWC. The family atmosphere created within Kupita/Transiciones and nurtured after within sister circle for BWC is the ideal model for intentional institutional inclusion. The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Annual Report connects to the intentional institutional inclusion for BWC due to the accomplishments of improved outcomes and services to students. There was an increase in student participation in the Kupita/Transiciones pre-orientation program and the fall mentoring program as well. There was also an increase in the student visits to the SMC, and SMC served as a resource for BWC.

As administrators shared the intentional efforts from the institution toward inclusion, Administrator W shared the importance of having a culturally relevant curriculum and explained the diversity course requirement for undergraduate students at HSU. Each undergraduate student was required to take two core diversity courses during their four years or more at HSU. Although HSU has a diversity requirement, Administrator W still felt more culturally relevant curriculum should be implemented across campus. I was shocked to learn HSU had more than one diversity core course because some institutions do not require diversity courses at all. The message sent to all students at HSU spoke to diversity as a priority for all.

At HSU, the BWC spoke of the SMC and sister circle as a safe and welcoming space for them. These crafted spaces were intentional at HSU and provided students of color and especially BWC with a sense of belonging and a space on campus created just for them. As Administrator D declared, sister circle and other diverse student

organizations' goal was to foster a sense of cultural affirmation and sense of belonging.

Administrator D declared,

In particular, at a predominantly White institution and those being intentional crafted spaces, that we're prioritizing, that we're funding. We've been very intentional to keep it as a programmatic element versus a student organization. It is a mixture of programmatic and student organizational structure.

The administrators directly connected to the sister circle program wanted to provide a structure that included a programmatic and student organizational structure to be able to have a balance of administrator input and student ownership. The functional structure of the sister circle provided administrative support through the advisor and student ownership and structure by way of the executive board members.

A key component to the sister circle program at HSU was sustainable resources and funding. The administrators with control over the budget explained the importance of strategically budgeting for the program and making the program a priority.

Administrator B shared,

That is the main piece. So, when we go before our budget officer, and, you know. I have oversight over all the budget, and because it's a critical piece of what we do, it is written right into the budget. And so, what our directors do is give us, you know, a summary of what their needs are. And so, we try to meet those needs. If we have to provide more in a standing budget, we'll do that. Our division is very creative. We'll never get all the money we need. However, we are creative, so almost every area raises money. Yeah, so for sister circle, there is a budget for it, and they will always have that budget. Now, do they need more? Yes. And will they get it? Yes. I'm not a person who just started out, so you know, we'll figure it out. And so, I mean our programs are important to us because that's what helps our students thrive.

The sister circle program is important, valuable, and helps BWC thrive. Administrator B touched on some key points about sustaining the sister circle program, including having it

written into the overall budget. The program will always have a budget, and that is the critical piece for the program to be supported financially. Administrator D affirmed making the budget line a requirement and responsibility for the director and assistant director of the SMC provided various reporting levels. These levels promote accountability and make it a priority and part of their strategic efforts. The advisor of the sister circle program noted that other important elements beyond the budget connected to the value of the program. As Administrator W noted, the division of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion advocates on behalf of sister circle to ensure that its budget stays the same because its constituents saw value in the program.

When asked about who is responsible for helping to change the campus climate, Administrator D spoke about moving beyond sympathy to empathy when it comes to diversity and inclusion:

Yeah, and people, you know, just their inability to even want to talk about it right now. You know, it's, it's interesting to do this, and then this for me to say something like that as a White person, right? I remember you're making me think of something that happened this past November, our Black action students have this beautiful event called our Global Ball. They've been doing it for 50 years. It's huge! And we always start with the Black national anthem. We always do that with the MLK program too. So, I know the words to it. I didn't think anything about it. I was singing it, and I had a group of students next to me who didn't know me, and they were shocked. But it was this, also this moment to me about people like me, who sit in these roles and talk about what is sense of belonging really mean—it's something that small, that was so significant. One of the students even sent me an email later because I introduced myself but that, you know, that's the heart of why, and I think it's the heart of what you're trying to generate out of a sister circle. Right?

To be authentic when it comes to dialogue about diversity and inclusion, it is critical to shift from sympathy to empathy. This is a necessity because as Administrator D

displayed, knowing the Black national anthem was important, but the simple act of students of color noticing it opened up the opportunity for the students to see her in a different light. Being an administrator working with students of color, it is significant to be able to sympathize with incidents that occur, but empathy provides the avenue of understanding and learning from one another.

Overall, HSU being intentional and making inclusion a priority has resulted in numerous programs and initiatives for students of color and, most importantly for BWC, improved sense belonging and enjoyment of their college experience. Having elements of inclusion weaved into the inner workings of the institution has been vital for HSU, and it was evident that diversity and inclusion is a foundational fabric within the institution. Two BWC, Ryan and Renee, shared a simple yet profound interpretation of diversity being a priority for every PWI. When asked whether institutions have a responsibility to BWC and to create spaces for them, Renee declared,

Yeah, because of a lot of times, like our institution has the president, even though she retired. She gave us a lot of funding for the SMC. So, it also depends on the funding because of some schools, they're like, why do we need an SMC? We can use that money for something else. So, it's like having to convince them that this is important. And as an institution, don't y'all wanna have diversity? Like campaigning, whatever you need to do, like, in that sense, you gotta do it—by any means. Necessary type of stuff. Yeah, you got to make that available. And in the future, it'll benefit that institution and benefit your people.

Renee dropped some amazing nuggets of knowledge related to diversity being a priority at PWI. She raised some great points about funding and diversity, questioning what financial efforts are solely for diversity. According to Renee, if diversity is important to an institution, they will do what they need to do by any means necessary to make it

available. Ryan felt similarly as she explained the importance of prioritizing diversity; she affirmed, “As an institution, you can’t say, ‘We prioritize diversity, and we want everyone to feel included and don’t have a safe space already created for people to feel included and to feel safe.’ It’s so hypocritical to say.” She hit the jackpot: if a PWI claims to have diversity as a priority, then they will have safe spaces created for people to feel included. Ryan said it best, and I was elated she shared those wonderful words of wisdom because institutions need to hear the voices of BWC plain and simple. BWC understand what they need, and intentional institutional inclusion is the key to helping change their experiences at PWI. The BWC at HSU provided the simplest yet most powerful explanation for intentional institutional inclusion: You just make it a priority by any means necessary.

Chapter Summary

Within this chapter, I provide an overview of the participants in the case study at HSU. I discuss the emergent themes: Spaces for Sisterhood, Sense of Belonging, Campus Agent, and Intentional Institutional Inclusion. The emergent themes provided encompassed the experiences of the BWC and the administrators connected to the sister circle program at HSU. The voices of the participants allowed me to make meaning of how HSU created a climate that nurtured the sister circle program on campus for BWC to develop, succeed, and persist.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the findings connected to the literature review. In addition, I provide implications for future research and practice related to BWC, sister circles, and PWI.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this case study was to examine how institutions create climates that nurture sister circles for Black womyn collegians (BWC) to develop, succeed, and persist at predominantly White institutions (PWI). This study examined the impact of sister circles on the experiences of BWC participating in the sister circle program at Hope State University (HSU). The data sources were interviews, direct observations, and documentation review. The participants were 10 BWC involved in the sister circle program at HSU as general or executive board members and four administrators connected to it. The theoretical framework I utilized to examine the case was Black feminist thought. Case study was selected as the methodology in an effort to focus on a “case” and obtain a realistic perspective on the sister circle program at HSU (Yin, 2014). This study addressed one research question: How do institutions create climates that nurture sister circles for BWC to develop, succeed, and persist at PWI? I used thematic analysis to interpret how HSU created a climate that nurtured sister circles to help BWC to develop, succeed, and persist. Within this chapter, I provide the following: discussion of findings, implications for practice, and implications for future research on how institutions can create climates that nurture sister circles to impact the experiences of BWC at PWI.

Discussion of Findings

Within this study, I examined how institutions create climates that nurture sister circles for BWC to develop, succeed, and persist at PWI. The purpose of my study was to understand how institutions nurture the climate for sister circles to help BWC develop, succeed, and persist. I found there are important elements to creating climates that nurture sister circles that positively impact BWC experiences to develop, succeed, and persist at PWI. For the BWC at HSU, creating spaces in which they felt safe and could create sisterhood, belong, have campus agents of color who represented them, and intentional institutional inclusion efforts within and by the university was vital. Additionally, having a welcoming campus racial climate for BWC allowed for a positive shift within their experiences on campus. Black feminist thought theoretically connected to the experiences shared by the BWC at HSU as they worked to combat the negative socially constructed images of Black womyn on campus and in society (Collins, 2012, 1986). Furthermore, the BFT themes of self-valuation/self-definition, interlocking systems of oppression, and the importance of African American womyn's culture were all thoroughly weaved into the stories and conversations the BWC shared with me. Elements of campus racial climate theoretical framework were also present within the study.

I was able to answer my research question, *How do institutions create a climate that nurtures sister circles for BWC to develop, succeed, and persist at PWI*, through thematic analysis. With my study, I was able to highlight the way in which institutions—specifically PWI—can nurture sister circles for BWC. The BWC and administrators

within my study explained the powerful and vital need the sister circle program played in the lives of the BWC and administrators at HSU. Porter (2013) discussed the importance of additional spaces of support just for undergraduate Black womyn to their identity development at PWI. My study affirmed the value of counter-spaces such as sister circles to assist in the development of BWC at PWI.

Through thematic analysis, I made sense of the experiences of the BWC and administrators connected to the sister circle program at HSU. After many rounds of coding (open and a priori coding) and analyzing the data, the following themes emerged: spaces for sisterhood, sense of belonging, campus agents, and intentional institutional inclusion.

Themes and Literature

Within this section, I discuss the findings related to the literature provided in Chapter 2. Croom et al. (2017) centered their research on the importance of providing counter-spaces for undergraduate Black womyn to tackle the issues of oppression they face. Additionally, Dowell's (2010) research focused on the role of university-sponsored student support services as a critical factor in the experiences of African American students at PWI. Lastly, Commodore et al. (2018), Porter (2013), and Winkle-Wagner's (2015) research focused on undergraduate Black womyn's experience at PWI and the need for improving those experiences through counter-spaces. My case study findings add to the literature about BWC and improving their experiences utilizing sister circles and nurturing the campus climate at PWI for BWC.

From the stories and experiences of the 10 BWC and four administrators at HSU, the emergent themes were: spaces for sisterhood, sense of belonging, campus agents and intentional institutional inclusion. The *spaces for sisterhood* theme connected to the importance the BWC and administrators placed on having a physical and emotional space to feel empowered, develop, and build community within the sister circle program. Additionally, BWC shared being able to express within the sister circle the oppression they experience on campus and within society. The *sense of belonging* theme highlights the BWC being able to feel comfort, security, and support on campus, resources being present for them (i.e., sister circle and SMC), having campus feel like their home away from home, and a sense of togetherness with other BWC and the Black community on campus. The *campus agents* theme explained the value for BWC to build relationships with administrators, faculty, and staff, representation and awareness of Black womyn leaders on campus for BWC, and the importance of campus agents investing in BWC. The *intentional institutional inclusion* theme expressed the actions and efforts made by the institution to move in the right direction towards inclusion, intentional programs/initiatives for BWC, intentional programs/initiatives with diversity as a priority, crafted spaces for BWC, intentional funding, and moving beyond sympathy to empathy within diversity and inclusion. The themes and findings from this study provide institutions with possible solutions to create climates that can nurture sister circles for BWC to develop, succeed, and persist at PWI.

Spaces for sisterhood. The 10 BWC within the study celebrated the appreciation of having a physical space to meet for sister circle and within the SMC. Additionally,

they explained how the space provided more than just a physical space for them to build community but allowed them to be their full authentic selves and feel safe at the same time. The findings supported Porter's (2013) research when her participants noted the importance of supportive environments such as the office of multicultural affairs mattering and being vital in the undergraduate Black womyn's experiences. Additionally, Porter's (2013) study also encouraged institutions to provide support through counter-spaces such as sister circles at PWI. All 10 BWC participants and administrators affirmed how instrumental having the sister circle program and the SMC was in the foundational experience of BWC at HSU. Having the physical and emotional space for sisterhood was necessary for the BWC at HSU, and my findings overwhelmingly expressed that. The findings within this study affirmed McClain and Perry's (2017) research, which noted factors that encourage retention such as cultural spaces at PWI can be "safe havens" for students of color to be themselves and empowered.

Personal development within the sister circle program was continually discussed by all 10 of the BWC and the four administrators, and they attributed the weekly sister circle meetings and activities as the main contributing factor to their development. My study confirmed Miller's (2017) study, which highlighted factors such as learning through personal development within student involvement as an important way BWC succeed. This study encouraged higher education institutions to make BWC a focal point of the student involvement programs and initiatives at PWI.

Nine of 10 BWC at HSU noted experiencing racial oppression on campus, specifically within their classes. These oppressive incidents created an uncomfortable

environment and made the BWC feel like an “outsider” just for being present in class. The findings in this study asserted Kelly et al.’s (2017) study, which focused on Black alumni from a PWI, and found their experiences of feeling othered on campus impacted their ability to engage and silenced their voices as Black womyn in the classroom. Additionally, the BWC at HSU spoke of the challenge of having to prove their intelligence to their White peers in the classroom; this relates to Jackson’s (1998) study, which discussed the daily struggle and authentic experience of undergraduate black womyn having to work hard and constantly prove their intelligence to others. When campus racial climate was discussed within the study, all 10 of the BWC and the four administrators at HSU were candid about the current state of their campus racial climate and the impact it had on BWC. The BWC explained there was a division between the Black students and White students, and many of the BWC felt tolerated by their White peers. The experiences of the BWC at HSU related to campus racial climate directly connected to the research of Mwangi, Thelamour, Ezeofor, and Carpenter (2018) and Ancis et al. (2000), which spoke to African American students having negative perceptions of campus climate from White students on the campus. The campus climate and connection to students of color at HSU connects to a story Administrator B shared about the oldest Black student organization on campus at HSU and their impact on diversity at HSU, Black Action Students (BAS). The Black Action Students organization was founded in 1968 as a response to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and to fight for social justice on campus and within society. The formation of BAS was a transformative action by the Black students at HSU, which resulted in a staged walkout

because the Black students did not feel the university provided events or activities that focus on their culture. The walkout forced the university to negotiate with BAS and other students, and a major result of the walkout, was the creation of the Institute for African-American (1969), Center for Pan-African Culture (1970), and the Department of Pan-African Studies (1976). BAS was a pivotal cultural student organization that impacted the trajectory of the experiences of Black students at HSU, and the equity work of the students in BAS was foundational to the diversity work at HSU. Administrator B explained, and she did not think there would be a Student Multicultural Center without BAS. BAS was critical in creating the commitment to diversity HSU needed and Black students were at the forefront of it.

Within this study, the theme of spaces of sisterhood was weaved throughout the experiences shared by the BWC and the administrators. The sister circle program and the SMC symbolized the importance of sisterhood for the BWC at HSU. Although the BWC experienced oppression in various forms whether in class or in general on campus, the sister circle program and the SMC provided the solace they needed to develop, succeed, and persist at HSU.

Sense of belonging. For all 10 of the BWC and administrators in the study, sense of belonging on campus for BWC was necessary because belonging provided a feeling of comfort, support, and security. The BWC expressed how the sister circle program provided all the elements of sense of belonging. The findings in this study confirmed the importance of creating a sense of belonging for BWC, supporting Dortch and Patel's (2017) study, which researched the impact of microaggressions on the sense of belonging

for undergraduate Black womyn in STEM. Dortch and Patel encouraged PWI to create institutionalized support systems for women of color to meet the needs of BWC in the sciences.

All of the BWC at HSU highlighted having resources just for them on campus such as sister circle and the SMC, which made them feel a sense of belonging. For the BWC, having resources already created for them contributed to their belief that the institution valued them. These findings directly connect to Porter and Dean's (2015) study, which expressed the challenge of BWC having to navigate PWI alone to make meaning of their identity and sense of belonging.

The key to sense of belonging for the BWC at HSU was just feeling accounted for and thought of within the institution. For them, this was executed by the institution through the mere existence of the sister circle program, SMC, and resources that provided comfort and security for them on campus.

Campus agents. Every single BWC within the study referenced a campus agent of color who impacted their experience in a powerful way. All the administrators spoke of the relationships they built at HSU with BWC and how vital forging those connections were. The BWC expressed the desire to confide in a Black womyn administrator, faculty, or staff member because they felt she would understand them better, directly connecting to Mosely's (1980) study, which focused on the experiences of Black womyn administrators and identified the barriers and challenges they faced. Beyond the relationships campus agents of color build with BWC at HSU, all of the BWC and

administrators echoed having representation of Black womyn leaders on campus as fundamental for BWC to see themselves on campus.

The value of campus agents of color for the development and continued investment in BWC was shared through the stories of BWC and administrators at HSU. The BWC and administrators in the study felt the sister circle and SMC were the connection for BWC and campus agents of color to find and create the relationships important to helping BWC succeed at HSU.

Intentional institutional inclusion. The theme of intentional institutional inclusion speaks to the hope the 10 BWC and the four administrators had related to diversity and inclusion at HSU. All of the BWC and administrators within the study spoke positively of the actions and forward movement of HSU toward a more inclusive climate and institution. The findings of the study directly connect to Smith's (2015) posed questions to institutions related to institutional culture: "Does diversity seem salient in the symbols, values, and feeling of the campus? Is diversity visible or is it visible by its invisibility?" (p. 207). Overwhelmingly, the BWC and administrators believed HSU had created initiatives and programs that were woven into the fabric of the institution but were authentic and real, but they noted there still was work that needed to be done to change the campus climate for SOC, especially BWC. Administrator A explained she was ready for HSU to cause real systematic change. Administrator A along with the other BWC were happy with the progress at HSU. However, getting to the root of systematic change is the real key to inclusion.

Although all the BWC and administrators voiced the continued diversity and inclusion work to be done at HSU, they also shared their appreciation for the current efforts made by the institution for BWC and making diversity a priority. When asked about the intentional programs/initiatives for BWC, all participants referenced the sister circle program, the Women's Center's Where Do Black Women Go? initiative, and the SMC's Kupita/Transiciones pre-orientation program as actions made specifically to support BWC at HSU. The intentional programs/initiatives for BWC at HSU directly asserted Lau's (2003) research, which highlighted the need for institutions to create spaces and intentional (academic and social) support services for SOC to increase their sense of belonging and indicate that the institution noticed them and was attempting to help them.

These intentional programs/initiatives for BWC at HSU provided the narrative to BWC that not only do they matter but also the institution has created long-term support for them to develop, succeed, and persist at HSU. Along with the intentional programs/initiatives, intentional funding for the sister circle program was explained by the administrators directly connected to it. Administrator B explained that sister circle will always have a budget line because it's a priority and the program helps students to thrive. The concept of intentional funding for BWC programs and other SOC programs speaks to Smith's (2009) research that declared if diversity continues to be a separate component of institutional work, the institutional work at the core will be unaffected by diversity. Intentional funding may symbolize a small paintbrush stroke on a large canvas

called diversity and inclusion, but one powerful brush stroke can be the foundational piece needed for SOC and especially BWC related to diversity and inclusion at PWI.

Although all the themes hold value within this study, intentional institutional inclusion provided a peek into the window of diversity and inclusion efforts at HSU currently and indicated where it is headed. The BWC and administrators have concerns about the campus racial climate, especially for BWC inside the classroom; however, with the overall institutional efforts of making diversity and inclusion a priority, there was a sense of optimism present at HSU. One of the keys to change is to have actions become part of an institution's routine, and at HSU, the hope was these diversity and inclusion actions will become the norm.

Limitations

There were a few limitations within this study. It was bounded according to the case selected. This study was conducted at HCU, a public, predominately White institution located in the Midwest. The study focused solely on the sister circle program at HCU, which does not reflect all sister circle programs at all PWI. Another limitation was HCU was selected as the research site because of its documented commitment to diversity with intentional counter-spaces for BWC. Not every institution prioritizes or has a commitment to diversity, which is a major limitation because within this case study the institution needed to have a documented commitment to diversity to understand holistically how the institution created a climate to nurture the sister circle program for BWC. Additionally, the ability for this study to be generalizable was not possible because

the experiences of the 10 BWC and four administrators at HSU may have been different at other PWI in the United States.

Implications for Practice

When I started this journey called dissertating, I always held on to the feeling of isolation that 18-year-old Courtney felt when she arrived on campus at Susquehanna University as my motivation for change. My goal was to stop any other BWC from having that feeling when they arrived on campus at any PWI. Clearly, that was an ambitious but impossible goal. Conducting my study at HCU allowed for me to know that BWC still are hurting at PWI and want to be heard. All 10 BWC within this study at HSU were authentic and apologetic about their experiences, which I appreciated. I did not know if these womyn would accept me or want to share their stories, but they were ready and willing to go there! I created a bond with these womyn within a matter of days. There were moments of laughter, affirmation, and many moments of vulnerability in which it was clear that the BWC at HSU wanted their voices to be heard and have the support they need. Their stories and experiences made it more apparent that the work institutions are doing—specifically PWI—still needs to have BWC voices present at the table. Even with continued support, BWC need a space to express themselves because they deserve to be heard. I see my study being helpful to PWI overall, but specifically to multicultural centers, residence life, and student life. These areas in particular have an essential impact on the experiences of students, and this study will allow for them to focus on BWC. The implications for practice in this section provide an aerial view of

how to help institutions understand the importance of BWC and how sister circle programs are needed within the institution and student experience.

Institutional Responsibility and Accountability to Black Womyn Collegians

The concept of institutional responsibility and accountability to BWC may seem farfetched, but it should present and real. Black womyn collegians are graduating at high rates (NCES, 2017), and they attend PWI that are not prepared or retaining them (Grier-Reed et al., 2016; Rodgers & Summers, 2008). If BWC attending PWI is not a mind-boggling idea but actual facts (Commodore et al., 2018), then PWI taking responsibility and accountability for the treatment and development of BWC should be the norm. The first step in the right direction for PWI related to BWC is to acknowledge there is no support mechanism in place for them at most PWI. Institutional leaders must start somewhere and assessing BWC directly can help bridge the gap and provide meaningful insight. This can start with a focus group of BWC speaking about their experiences on campus and asking how the institution can improve their support of BWC. Next, the institution should have BWC as part of its strategic plan because that allows for the institution to be accountable to BWC if they do not meet the goals identified for them. Policy formation related to BWC and their experiences at PWIs should be seen within the strategic plan. In this study, HSU administrators added funding within a budget line for the sister circle program under the Student Multicultural Center. For PWIs having a specific and intentional budget line for programs related to BWC and their experience is necessary, and imperative for it to be in the strategic plan. The placement of the budget

line being in the strategic plan, allows for accountability and policy formation for BWC and the improvement of their experiences at PWIs.

Another factor of institutional responsibility is having Black womyn representation within leadership on campus because having this type of representation for BWC provides a feeling of hope and achievement. There is no foolproof way to make institutions wake up to the needs of BWC, but steps must be taken.

Campus Climate Action

Campus climate matters for any institution, but for PWI, it can be the Jenga piece they do not want to touch. However, campus climate connects to so much for students, particularly students of color and most importantly BWC, and it must be tackled. Within this study, HSU really dissected their campus climate study and utilized the feedback to transform the experiences of their students on campus —specifically BWC. Although campus climate study results may feel like ripping the band-aid off for many institutions for, sometimes you have to stop the bleeding. Yes, the campus climate study can reveal some ugly truths about your institution, but within the ugly truths can be the foundation for changing your institution and helping students in need. Institutions should take campus climate action in which they deeply look at findings and not only tackle issues within their strategic plan and committee work but also ensure that across the institution the issues are talked about. This does not mean they should have the diversity or

multicultural affairs office take the lead; rather, they should actually conceptualize campus climate action as an entire institutional effort.

Pipeline Programs for Black Womyn Collegians (Pre-Orientation Program)

One thing that was apparent throughout this study was the impact of the pre-orientation program for the BWC at HSU. All the BWC and the administrators raved about the program and how their experiences would not have been the same without it. Predominantly White institutions must create/tailor pre-orientation programs for BWC to adapt and feel a sense of belonging to the institution. The pre-orientation can provide BWC with the opportunity to meet other BWC and create a community of their own before classes start, which aids in their ability to engage on campus and in general. Next, BWC can meet administrators, faculty, and staff of color, who can serve as a resource and a campus agent they recognize as a place of support. Overall, a pipeline program for BWC no matter the structure is necessary to create a sense of belonging, security, and community for BWC once they set foot on campus.

Formal and Informal Sister Circle Programs

At many PWI, there are more informal than formal sister circle-type programs and having any sister circle-type program is needed. However, the concern with informal or student-created and led sister circle programs is lack of structure, professional staff presence, and program longevity. For a sister circle to function well and have permanency is the foundation, as well as the commitment the institution has to the program. I am not saying an informal student-led sister circle program cannot work, but what I am saying is for the sister circle program to have a lasting impact on campus, there

are some elements that need to be present. Additionally, I am tired of BWC having to create the spaces and programs that should already be established for them on campus. It is not the job of a student to create a program for BWC when there are administrators who need to be doing the work BWC are doing and not being paid to do.

I recommend a formal sister circle program structure because it places the responsibility on the institution to provide support for BWC at a higher level. Having a formal sister circle program requires that the institution provide a professional staff member, formal recognition of the program, and intentional funding.

Many sister circle programs are housed within the diversity or multicultural center, which I believe is the best support system for any sister circle. When it comes to structure, I believe having a direct professional staff member as the sister circle's advisor is needed because they have the ability to provide the guidance needed. In terms of the student structure, having an executive board and then general members seems to be the best way I have seen sister circles and other student organizations function. The only difference I would recommend is to have funding come from the diversity or multicultural office budget to ensure a continuous budget for the program. There is enough data to support the need for formal sister circles, and institutions need to decide where they stand with BWC, so a formal sister circle program is the step in the right direction.

Currently, there is no formal model for sister circle implementation at PWI, but I believe a formal model would be beneficial for BWC and for PWIs to be able to improve the experiences of BWC at PWIs. A model for the implementation of sister circles for

BWC at PWIs will be a foundational factor to help PWIs put the implications for practice into action. In addition, institutionally, supported sister circles are vital and impactful and critical to BWC sense of belonging, retention and overall psychological wellness.

Implications for Future Research

This study provided the experiences of 10 BWC and four administrators at HSU to help understand how institutions can nurture climates for sister circles at PWI. With this study, I was able to add to the body of knowledge for the experiences of BWC and sister circles, but there still is so much more research that needs to be done. As I looked for studies solely focused on BWC and sister circles or sister circle-type programs, the main study I found was Croom et al. (2017). Although I was grateful to find that study, there should be more research about BWC and the impact of sister circles because it is needed.

Black Womyn Collegians, Sister Circles, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Future research centered on the experiences of BWC and sister circle-type programs is needed because the more scholars research BWC and sister circles, the more awareness there can be. I also think having research about BWC at historically Black colleges and universities and how they create a community for Black womyn on campus can be useful for BWC and sister circles at PWI. The experiences of BWC at PWI and historically Black colleges and universities are vastly different, but I do believe it is important to understand the differences to be able to see the similarities.

Possible research questions for future research on BWC, sister circles, and historically Black colleges and universities include:

- How do historically Black colleges and universities create a climate that nurtures sisterhood for BWC to develop, succeed, and persist on campus?
- How are elements of sisterhood created among BWC at historically Black colleges and universities?
- How can formal sister circle programs support the development of BWC at historically Black colleges and universities?
- How do BWC at historically Black colleges and universities make meaning of their intersecting identities related to sisterhood on campus?

Black Womyn Collegians in STEM-Related Sister Circles

During my research about BWC and sister circles, I found many studies about BWC in STEM and their challenges in the classroom and on campus (Dortch & Patel, 2017; Johnson, 2012). I believe more research about BWC in STEM connected to sister circles as a source of support would be helpful and hopefully get them the support they need to persist.

Possible research questions for future research on BWC STEM majors and sister circles include:

- How are institutions, specifically PWI, creating safe spaces for BWC STEM majors on campus?
- How do BWC STEM majors make meaning of the racial or gender identity at a PWI?

- Sub question: Is one identity more salient than the other related to their experiences or treatment?
- How can a sister circle program for BWC STEM majors impact their sense of belonging within their major?

Black Graduate Womyn

Within my original study, I included Black graduate womyn, but my case study site did not support them, so I had to take them out of the study. However, I do believe this population needs to be studied further in general and as it relates to their experiences and sister circles. Black graduate womyn have some of the same issues that undergraduate Black womyn experience but on a different level and with varying components. I would love to see more research as it relates to their persistence within higher education and how sister circles can impact their experiences even more. Possible research questions for future research on Black graduate womyn and sister circles:

- How can PWI create sister circle programs for Black graduate womyn to make meaning of their experiences on campus?
- What type of support mechanisms do Black graduate womyn need to develop and succeed at PWI?
- What are the significant issues for Black graduate womyn at PWI?

Conclusion

Throughout the data collection process, I remembered thinking how lucky I was to be able to be in the presence of these 10 wonderful BWC at HSU because they spoke to all

of the things I experienced as an undergrad. Then, I quickly remembered all of this is a privilege, a privilege to tell these 10 BWC's stories and the story of the sister circle program at HSU. All of it came full circle as I recorded my last reflective journal entry, and I cried tears of joy because I would be able to have an impact on not only the experiences of the BWC at HSU but also hopefully all BWC who read this dissertation in the hopes of creating a sister circle at their PWI. For so long, Black Womyn and BWC have and continue to be silenced and ignored when they share their experiences, and within this study, my aim was to crack part of the brick wall many BWC experience at PWI.

The 10 BWC and four administrators within this study helped me to show that BWC deserve to have support mechanisms and how sister circle programs can be dynamic and essentially change the trajectory of every BWC at a PWI if the program is present. I asked all of the BWC and administrators at HSU, "How would the experiences of BWC differ if the sister circle program did not exist?" Their answer overwhelmingly was they cannot think of HSU not having the sister circle program. Administrator W asserted, "I can't even imagine it! And then, what spaces do you create and cultivate on campus for BWC to be able to reflect and decompress about life and in general? Where does that happen?" Administrator W's response is the reality for many BWC at PWI that do not have sister circles, and this should not be the case. Therefore, the question I pose is what will you do to ensure BWC have sister circle programs to help them develop, succeed, and persist at PWI?

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

CLEMSON UNIVERSITY IRB

Clemson University Mail - Exempt Determination for IRB2018-463: Calling All the Sisters...

2/16/19, 12:20 AM



Courtney Allen <callen7@g.clemson.edu>

Exempt Determination for IRB2018-463: Calling All the Sisters...

1 message

Nalinee Patin <npatin@clemson.edu>
To: Robin J Phelps-Ward <rjphelp@clemson.edu>
Cc: "callen7@g.clemson.edu" <callen7@g.clemson.edu>

Fri, Jan 11, 2019 at 11:09 AM

Dear Dr. Phelps-Ward,

The Clemson University Office of Research Compliance reviewed the protocol titled "**Calling All The Sisters: The Impact Of Sister Circles On The Retention and Experiences Of Black Womyn Collegians at PWIS**" and a determination was made on January 11, 2019 that the proposed activities involving human participants qualify as **Exempt under category B2** in accordance with federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101.
<http://media.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/exemption-categories.pdf>.

No further action, amendments, or IRB oversight of the protocol is required except in the following situations:

1. Substantial changes made to the protocol that could potentially change the review level. Researchers who modify the study purpose, study sample, or research methods and instruments in ways not covered by the exempt categories will need to submit an expedited or full board review application.
2. Occurrence of unanticipated problem or adverse event; any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects, complications, and/or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Research Compliance immediately.
3. Change in Principal Investigator (PI)

All research involving human participants must maintain an ethically appropriate standard, which serves to protect the rights and welfare of the participants. This involves obtaining informed consent and maintaining confidentiality of data. Research related records should be retained for a minimum of three (3) years after completion of the study.

The Clemson University IRB is committed to facilitating ethical research and protecting the rights of human subjects. Please contact us if you have any questions and use the IRB number and title when referencing the study in future correspondence.

All the best,

Nalinee

APPENDIX B

HOPE STATE UNIVERSITY INITIAL CONTACT MAIL

Courtney Allen—Sister Circle Program

Courtney Allen <callen7@g.clemson.edu>

Thu, Oct 4, 2018 at 11:32 AM

To: awilli43@█.edu

Cc: cporte24@█.edu

Dear Ashley,

My name is Courtney Allen and I'm a doctoral candidate at Clemson University. I was given your information by Dr. Christa Porter because she felt you would be the best point of contact. My dissertation topic and research focus on Black womyn collegians (BWC) and how institutions create climates that nurture sister circles at PWI. Over the years in my doctoral program I have researched various institutions and Hope State's Sister Circle program has been at the forefront of my research and mind, because of the wonderful work coming from the program. The sister circle program at Hope State provides womyn of color, and especially BWC, the space to feel empowered but also unpack the microaggressions and racial battle fatigue they may experience on campus and in society.

I wanted to speak more with you about the program and the learn more about the history of the program and the students participating in the program. It will be very informative for my dissertation and learning more the institutional involvement in the program. I would like to set up a time to connect over the phone in the coming weeks. If you are interested in connecting, please let me know what times and dates work best for your schedule.

Thank you for considering this request!

Courtney Allen

--

Courtney Allen

Project Director, Goal POST

PhD Candidate, Educational Leadership-Higher Education

Director of Community Outreach, Graduate Student Government

callen7@g.clemson.edu

My Gallup Strengths: Woo* Communication* Positivity* Strategic* Arranger*

WILLIAMS, ASHLEY <awilli43@██████.edu>
To: Courtney Allen <callen7@g.clemson.edu>
Cc: "Porter, Christa" <cporte24@██████.edu>

Fri, Oct 5, 2018 at 11:54 AM

Good morning Courtney-
I hope all is well!

This is awesome! And yes, I am interested in connecting,
Please see dates/times I am available to meet below:

- Tuesday, October 23rd anytime between 9:00am – 11:00am
- Thursday, October 25th between 11:00am – 12:00pm
- Friday, October 26th anytime between 1:00pm – 4:00pm

Please let know if any of the times listed above works for you. If not, please provide some alternative options and I will do my best to make it work.

I look forward to connecting with you!
Ashley

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAIL (STUDENT)

Dear Student:

Hello, my name is Courtney Allen and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Educational Leadership (Higher Education) program at Clemson University. I plan to conduct a qualitative research study to explore how institutions create climates that nurture sister circles and impact the experiences of Black womyn collegians at Predominately White institutions (PWI). This study is being conducted by myself under the direct supervision of my Chair and Professor, Dr. Robin Phelps-Ward at Clemson University.

The purpose of this study is to examine how institutions—particularly—PWI create climates that nurture counter-spaces (i.e., sister circles) for BWC to develop, succeed and persist. A focal point of interest within this study is unpacking the institutional responsibility PWI have to improve the experience of BWC and examining the way in which these actions occur and when they do not. The hope is this study will create a model for other institutions to implement sister circles for BWC on their campuses, to positively impact the retention of BWC. I want the recommendations of my study to be transferable, so others in higher education who work with and impact the experience of BWC can use my work to change and improve the experience of BWC through counter-spaces.

You are receiving this email, because you were recommended by the Student Multicultural Center as a participant of the sister circle program. Due to your involvement in the sister circle program, you were identified as a possible participant for this study. I am seeking your participation in the following:

- review an introductory video about the study (approximately 10 minutes)
- an individual one-on-one audio recorded interview (approximately 45-60 minutes)
- follow up interview after one-on-one interview (approximately 15-20 minutes)
- an audio recorded focus group (approximately 90-120 minutes)
- follow up audio recorded interview after focus group interview (approximately 15-20 minutes)
- review of interview themes

If you agree to participate in this study, all participants would have the ability to select a pseudonym). Your participation is voluntary and as a participant you are free to stop participating at any point in time and may choose not to engage with any portions of the study should you choose not to.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions, comments, or concerns. I hope you will consider participating in my study. Thank you in advance for your time and considering this research study.

Courtney Allen

callen7@g.clemson.edu

917-224-5191

Ph.D. Candidate, Educational Leadership (Higher Education)

Clemson University

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT EMAIL (ADMINISTRATOR)

Dear Administrator:

Hello, my name is Courtney Allen and I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Educational Leadership (Higher Education) program at Clemson University. I plan to conduct a qualitative research study to explore how institutions create climates that nurture sister circles and impact the experiences of Black womyn collegians at Predominately White institutions (PWI). This study is being conducted by myself under the direct supervision of my Chair and Professor, Dr. Robin Phelps-Ward at Clemson University.

The purpose of this study is to examine how institutions—particularly—PWI create climates that nurture counter-spaces (i.e., sister circles) for BWC to develop, succeed and persist. A focal point of interest within this study is unpacking the institutional responsibility PWI have to improve the experience of BWC and examining the way in which these actions occur and when they do not. The hope is this study will create a model for other institutions to implement sister circles for BWC on their campuses, to positively impact the retention of BWC. I want the recommendations of my study to be transferable, so others in higher education who work with and impact the experience of BWC can use my work to change and improve the experience of BWC through counter-spaces.

You are receiving this email, because you were recommended by the Student Multicultural Center as a participant of the sister circle program. Due to your involvement in the sister circle program, you were identified as a possible participant for this study. I am seeking your participation in the following:

- review an introductory video about the study (approximately 10 minutes)
- an individual one-on-one recorded interview (approximately 45-60 minutes)
- follow up interview after one-on-one interview (approximately 15-20 minutes)
- review of interview themes

If you agree to participate in this study, all participants would have the ability to select a pseudonym. Your participation is voluntary and as a participant you are free to stop participating at any point in time and may choose not to engage with any portions of the study should you choose not to. If you choose to participate, the information you provide will be confidential and your identity will be protected.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions, comments, or concerns. I hope you will consider participating in my study. Thank you in advance for your time and considering this research study.

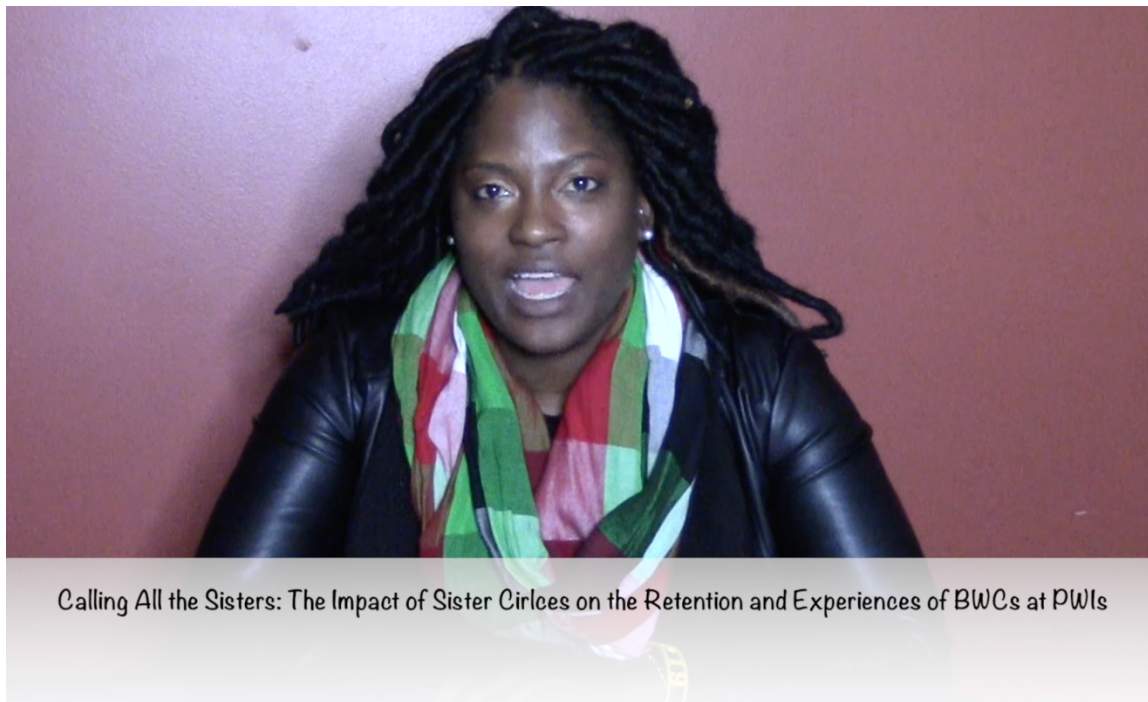
Courtney Allen
callen7@g.clemson.edu
917-224-5191
Ph.D. Candidate, Educational Leadership (Higher Education)
Clemson University

APPENDIX E

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT VIDEO



Hi! My name is Courtney Allen and I'm a Ph.D. candidate at Clemson University.



The title of this study is “Calling All the Sisters: The Impact of Sister Circles on the Retention and Experiences of BWC at PWI.” So, you’re probably wondering why you are watching this video? You’re watching this video, because you were either nominated or selected, by an administrator because of your participation in the sister circle program at Hope State. They felt, that your experiences and stories would be really valuable to my study of BWC and sister circles. So, congratulations on being nominated or selected! The aim of this study is to be able to highlight sister circle programs—particularly the sister circle program at Hope State. The program at Hope State, helps support Black womyn undergraduate students like yourself to be able to persist, be empowered and succeed at the PWI you attend. The goal is to be able to utilize this study and this program, as a template for other PWI that may not have sister circles programs or do not know about these types of programs. The hope is this study will show them how important and impactful these types of programs can be to the experiences of Black womyn undergraduate students at PWI. So, why this study? Why this research? This research is really important, because this is my story. As an undergraduate Black womyn, I did not have the support I needed just like many others do not at PWI. I wanted to be able to research this and figure out, how I can help fix this issue for Black womyn undergraduate students everywhere. Your participation in this study, will help to push the conversation to the forefront and have university administrators, faculty and staff to see the importance of a sister circle program is to the BWC at their institution. If you do participate in this study, know that you will be helping many other Black womyn undergraduate students like yourself currently but also in the future. I hope you do decide to participate, if you do, I cannot wait to meet you! I will be on campus in January and thank you again for watching.

APPENDIX F

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Q1 First Name and Last Name

Q2 Class year – Please circle the class status that applies to you

Freshmen Sophomore Junior Senior Masters Doctoral

Q3 Please select a pseudonym (the name you want to use to protect your identity)

Q4 Major

Q5 Hometown

Q6 Race (What race do you identify with?)

Q7 Ethnicity (What ethnicity do you identify with?)

Q8 How do you participate in the sister circle program ? (Please circle the one that applies)

General member

Executive board member

Q9 What does the sister circle program at Hope symbolize for you as a Black womyn student?

Q10 Has participating in the sister circle program influenced your decision to remain a student at Hope State?

Yes

No

Why?

Why?

Q11 What day and time works best for you to participate in a one-on-one interview and focus group?

Monday	9am-12pm	2pm-4pm	5pm-7pm	8pm-10pm
Tuesday	9am-12pm	2pm-4pm	5pm-7pm	8pm-10pm
Wednesday	9am-12pm	2pm-4pm	5pm-7pm	8pm-10pm
Thursday	9am-12pm	2pm-4pm	5pm-7pm	8pm-10pm
Friday	9am-12pm	2pm-4pm	5pm-7pm	8pm-10pm

APPENDIX G

STUDY PARTICIPANT LETTER (STUDENT)

CALLING ALL THE SISTERS: THE IMPACT OF SISTER CIRCLES ON THE RETENTION AND EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMYN COLLEGIANS AT PWIS

Description of the Study and Your Part in It

Courtney Allen, under the direction of the Principal Investigator, Dr. Robin Phelps-Ward, is inviting you to take part in a research study. Dr. Phelps-Ward is a professor at Clemson University, and Courtney Allen is a doctoral candidate at Clemson University. The purpose of this research is to examine how institutions—particularly PWI—create climates that nurture counter-spaces (i.e., sister circles) for BWC to develop, succeed and persist.

Your part in the study will be to share your experiences as a Black womyn collegian and the impact sister circles has on your ability to develop, succeed and persist at a PWI.

It will take you about a total of four (4) to five (5) hours to be in this study, including participation in the following:

- review an introductory video about the study (approximately 10 minutes)
- an individual one-on-one audio recorded interview (approximately 45-60 minutes)
- follow up interview after one-on-one interview (approximately 15-20 minutes)
- an audio recorded focus group (approximately 90-120 minutes)
- follow up interview after focus group interview (approximately 15-20 minutes)
- review of interview themes

Risks and Discomforts

We do not know of any risks or discomforts to you in this research study.

Possible Benefits

Although, there are no direct benefit from taking part in this study. The hope is this study will create a model for other institutions to implement sister circles for Black womyn collegians (BWC) on their campuses, to positively impact the retention of BWC. I want the recommendations of my study to be transferable, so others in higher education who work with and impact the experience of BWC can use my work to change and improve the experience of BWC through counter-spaces. The overall benefit is understanding the experiences of BWC and sister circles as a form of institutional responsibility to BWC at PWI.

Incentives

Each participant will be given a \$6 Starbucks gift card after the interview or focus group and during the focus group interview refreshments will be offered.

Protection of Privacy and Confidentiality

Your name will be provided in the email list provided by the Assistant Director of the Student Multicultural Center. However, the you can choose a pseudonym for the participant questionnaire and the chosen pseudonym will be used in the one-on-one interview and focus group. All recorded audio files will be on a password-protected computer. Ms. Allen and her PI will be the only people to access the data and the password information. The audio recordings will be retained for five years.

All questionnaires, interview audio files, direct observation review, document review, and memos will be stored in a secure location. Each pseudonym selected by you will be used within other study documents (e.g., interview transcripts) rather than your actual name. Some of the information shared during the group discussion may be personal, we ask that you respect the privacy of others during the group discussion and keep the information shared private. Please do not share any information that may be sensitive or make you uncomfortable. You may refuse to answer or leave the discussion at any time if you become uncomfortable.

The results of this study may be published in peer-reviewed journals, professional publications, or educational presentations: however, no participant or the university will be identified. The information you shared in this study will be used in future studies and will be identified by the pseudonym you provided during the study.

Choosing to Be in the Study

You may choose not to take part and you may choose to stop taking part at any time. You will not be punished in any way if you decide not to be in the study or to stop taking part in the study.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Robin Phelps-Ward at Clemson University at 864-656-4278 or rjphelp@clemson.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance at 864-656-0636 or irb@clemson.edu. If you are outside of the Upstate South Carolina area, please use the ORC's toll-free number, 866-297-3071. The Clemson IRB will not be able to answer

some study-specific questions. However, you may contact the Clemson IRB if the research staff cannot be reached or if you wish to speak with someone other than the research staff.

APPENDIX H

STUDY PARTICIPANT LETTER (ADMINISTRATOR)

CALLING ALL THE SISTERS: THE IMPACT OF SISTER CIRCLES ON THE RETENTION AND EXPERIENCES OF BLACK WOMYN COLLEGIANS AT PWIS

Description of the Study and Your Part in It

Courtney Allen, under the direction of the Principal Investigator, Dr. Robin Phelps-Ward, is inviting you to take part in a research study. Dr. Phelps- Ward is a professor at Clemson University, and Courtney Allen is a doctoral candidate at Clemson University. The purpose of this research is to examine how institutions—particularly PWI —create climates that nurture counter-spaces (i.e., sister circles) for BWC to develop, succeed and persist.

Your part in the study will be to share your experiences as a Black womyn collegian and the impact sister circles has on your ability to develop, succeed and persist at a PWI.

It will take you about a total of 2 hours to be in this study, including participation in the following:

- review an introductory video about the study (approximately 10 minutes)
- an individual one-on-one audio-recorded interview (approximately 45-60 minutes)
- follow up interview after one-on-one interview (approximately 15-20 minutes)
- review of interview themes

Risks and Discomforts

We do not know of any risks or discomforts to you in this research study.

Possible Benefits

Although, there are no direct benefit from taking part in this study. The hope is this study will create a model for other institutions to implement sister circles for Black womyn collegians (BWC) on their campuses, to positively impact the retention of BWC. I want the recommendations of my study to be transferable, so others in higher education who work with and impact the experience of BWC can use my work to change and improve the experience of BWC through counter-spaces. The overall benefit is understanding the experiences of BWC and sister circles as a form of institutional responsibility to BWC at PWI.

Incentives

Each participant will be given a \$6 Starbucks gift card after the interview

Protection of Privacy and Confidentiality

Your name will be provided in the email list provided by the Assistant Director of the Student Multicultural Center. However, you can choose a pseudonym and the chosen pseudonym will be used in the one-on-one interview. All recorded audio files will be on a password-protected computer. Ms. Allen and her PI will be the only people to access the data and the password information. The audio recordings will be retained for five years.

The data will be confidential. All interview audio files, direct observation review, document review, and memos will be stored in a secure location. Each pseudonym selected by you will be used within other study documents (e.g., interview transcripts) rather than your actual name.

We will do everything to protect your privacy and confidentiality. The results of this study may be published in peer-reviewed journals, professional publications, or educational presentations; however, no participant or university will be identified. The information you shared in this study will be used in future studies and will be identified by the pseudonym you provided during the study.

Choosing to Be in the Study

You may choose not to take part and you may choose to stop taking part at any time. You will not be punished in any way if you decide not to be in the study or to stop taking part in the study.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Robin Phelps-Ward at Clemson University at 864-656-4278 or rjphelp@clemson.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance at 864-656-0636 or irb@clemson.edu. If you are outside of the Upstate South Carolina area, please use the ORC's toll-free number, 866-297-3071. The Clemson IRB will not be able to answer some study-specific questions. However, you may contact the Clemson IRB if the research staff cannot be reached or if you wish to speak with someone other than the research staff.

APPENDIX I

ONE- ON-ONE STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Tell me about yourself and your journey to Hope State
2. How would you describe your experience on campus as a Black womyn?
3. If I ask other Black womyn at Hope State about their experience, what answer do you think I would get?
4. Can you describe the campus racial climate at Hope?
 - a. What do you feel are the contributing factors?
 - b. Who do you feel is responsible for changing the campus racial climate? How can it change and why?
5. Can you provide examples of any type of oppression (racial, gender, socio-economic) you experienced on campus?
 - a. What did you do?
 - b. What type of resources were provided for you?
6. What does support for Black womyn at your institution look like? Please explain
7. What are the reasons you stay a student at Hope State?
 - a. Did you ever consider leaving Hope State?

Yes No
 - a. Why?
8. How would you define/describe an environment in which you feel empowered to develop, succeed and persist academically and personally?
9. How did you learn about the sister circle program at Hope?

a. Did you seek out the program?

10. How does the sister circle program impact your experience as a Black womyn on campus?

11. In relation to the sister circle program, how would you describe the ways in which the sister circle program helps Black womyn?

Develop =

Succeed =

Persist =

12. What do you gain from attending SC general meetings and events?

13. If the sister circle program at Hope did not exist, how would the experience of Black womyn collegians differ?

APPENDIX J

ONE-ON ONE ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. How would you describe the for BWC on campus?
2. If I ask other Black womyn at Hope State about their experience, what answer do you think I would get?
3. Can you describe the campus racial climate at Hope?
 - a. What do you feel are the contributing factors?
 - b. Who do you feel is responsible for changing the campus racial climate?
How can it change and why?
4. What is the story of the creation of the sister circle program?
5. In relation to the sister circle program, how would you describe the ways in which the sister circle program helps Black womyn?

Develop =

Succeed =

Persist =
6. In what ways do you feel the institution provides support (financial, professional, etc.) for BWC?

How? Why not?
7. What type of support is needed to help BWC on campus?
8. What type of sustainable resources does the institution provide to maintain the sister circle program?
9. What do you feel the sister circle program provides for the BWC at Hope?

10. If you had all the resources in the world for the sister circle program, what would you add?
11. How has the sister circle program been impacted by the current racial and political climate?

APPENDIX K

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. How would you describe your experience on campus as a Black womyn?
2. If I ask other Black womyn at Hope State about their experience, what answer do you think I would get?
3. Can you describe the campus racial climate at Hope?
 - a. What do you feel are the contributing factors?
 - b. Who do you feel is responsible for changing the campus racial climate?
How can it change and why?
4. Can you provide examples of any type of oppression (racial, gender, socio-economic) you experienced on campus?
 - a. What did you do?
 - b. Did you ask for help?
5. What does support for Black womyn at your institution look like? Please explain
 - a. How?
6. What are the reasons you stay a student at Hope State?
 - a. Did you ever consider leaving Hope State?

YesNo
 - b. Why?
7. How would you define/describe an environment in which you feel empowered to develop, succeed and persist academically and personally?

8. How did you learn about the sister circle program at Hope?
 - a. Did you seek out the program?
9. How does the sister circle program impact your experience as a Black womyn on campus?
10. Are you a part of other culturally based programs on campus?
 - a. Is it being part of SC different? If yes why? If no why?
11. In relation to the sister circle program, how would you describe the ways in which the sister circle program helps Black womyn?
 - Develop =
 - Succeed =
 - Persist =
12. What do you gain from attending SC general meetings and events?
13. If the sister circle program at Hope did not exist, how would the experience of Black womyn collegians differ?

APPENDIX L

DOCUMENTATION REVIEW PROTOCOL

1. How does the institution provide support for BWC?
2. What sister program documents are used to recruit BWC?
3. How does the diversity mission promote BWC to develop, succeed, and persist?
4. How does the strategic plan incorporate supporting the sister circle program and BWC?

APPENDIX M

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

1. What issues are discussed during the executive meeting about BWC?
2. How are events created to help BWC develop, succeed and persist?
3. What type of atmosphere provides the best support for sister circle meetings and events?
4. How are BWC impacted by the sister circle general meetings and events?

APPENDIX N

SAMPLE OBSERVATION ENTRY

Monday, January 14, 2019

Sister Circle General Meeting

Observation Summary

I was a bit nervous before heading to campus to conduct the observation of the Sister Circle program. I think there were a number of reasons I was anxious, and I did not know how the young womyn would receive me. However, once I met a few e-board members and the general members I felt so welcomed and at home.

The overall experience was amazing, and this was from when I entered the student multicultural center until I left. There is a feeling of comfort being around other womyn, but even more of an authentic feeling being around of Black womyn and womyn of color. These young womyn embodied a strong sense of self and who they currently were and who they wanted their future self to be.

When I met a few of the e-board members they greeted me and were pleasant, but I could tell they were trying to feel me out. They asked what was so special about this sister circle program, and I provided my explanation of sister circle program at other PWI and how unique this one was. After I explained that, they were surprised, it's funny how being part of something that seems so normal on their campus and be so distant or nonexistent at other PWI. Providing them with the background and current stats of other sister circle programs and my excitement to be here with them and study their program, which opened them up to me.

This was the first day of the spring semester, so I did not know what to expect related to the turnout and the possible energy. Usually the first day of classes is quite busy and students are catching up, but the turnout was pretty great about 30-32 womyn attended.

The atmosphere is one of being free and comfortable, Ariana Grande's new song "Thank, next" playing in the background and various young womyn dancing around. The young womyn came into the student multicultural center, some running and hugging each other and others just walking in to find a seat in the semi-circle of chairs in the middle of the room. All the seats were full, and the sister circle e-board members stood out because they had on grey shirts with the sister circle logo.

The sister circle e-board directed the general meeting and started with discussion questions, which were meant to open the room up and welcome them. I was surprised

how quickly all the young womyn were all eager to throw out the issues they dealt with last semester. Issues of depression, imposter syndrome (some womyn did not know the definition and some others spoke up and explained what it was), perfection, being enough. There were many snaps and claps as other womyn explained different issues they dealt with over the semester.

The activity for the meeting centered around their action plan for the semester and the necessary steps needed to accomplish the goals you set. All the womyn were asked to “make your goals visual”, there were a few questions because some of the womyn wanted direction, but it was up for your own interpretation. This simple activity was so necessary and powerful, because this activity was an intentional plan for success and was done collectively which allowed for additional help and the ability to bounce ideas off of others. I felt this was so important and empowering to see these womyn create their plans for success and be so self-aware.

The activity took about 30-40 minutes and then some womyn shared their plans, which varied from attending class and turning in class assignments on time, to goals in the form of questions. One young womyn used questions as her goals: Depression—who is she? Define success—what success means to you?

There were so many inspiring visual goals shared and provided inspiration for all the womyn at the meeting which were affirmed by claps and snaps. These affirmations were on going throughout the meeting, which made me so excited to see how all these womyn where encouraging and uplifting to one another.

After a few others shared their goals, the president of SC told everyone to select the hardest goal they wanted to accomplish and break into groups to discuss the necessary steps to accomplish the goal they selected. Some of the womyn took a few minutes to decide which section of the room fit their main goal.

There ended up being four groups, and the president explained that these groups would be accountability groups and partners. The groups were spiritual, fitness, academic and other (which was a combination of people with different goals). Each group created plans, group chats and expectations for sticking to their goals and helping others within the group. This was the last part of the activity, and after this, announcements were given about the next sister circle meeting and topic. The assistant director of the SC program introduced me and why I traveled to campus to meet with them. I further explained how unique this SC program was in terms of professional staff attention and sustainable resources and support. When I explained that many PWI do not have SC programs with this type of structure they seemed surprised. I thanked them for letting me be here and expressed my excitement and admiration for them showing up and engaging the way they did.

The music was turned back on and some line dancing commenced until most of the young womyn left, and only the e-board members were left.

The sister circle general meeting was full of excitement and so much powerful actions, words and feelings. This sister circle general meeting provided a sense of comfort and genuine care for Black womyn that attended. The womyn that came tonight wanted to be there and it showed in their actions and their engagement with the other womyn and with the activities. I left with a sense of pride and being overwhelmed with how important a space like this is for Black womyn on campus, and if a womyn at this institution stays involved her entire college career what a dynamic amount of support and growth she would experience.

I'm still glowing, thinking of the laughs, small jokes, claps, snaps and uplifting spirit I witnessed from the Black womyn in the SC program. This feeling needs to be an option to every Black womyn collegian at every PWI because it is their right.

APPENDIX O

CODES AND THEMES

Spaces for Sisterhood Theme

Codes	Sisterhood	SIS	Representation	REP*
	Self-Valuation	SDV*	Challenges	CHE
	Microaggressions	MIC	Struggle	STR
	Oppressive Behavior	OPB*	Full Authentic Self	FAS*
	Angry Black Womyn	ABW	Aggressive	AGG
	Only One	ONO	Inspire	INS*
	Overwhelmed by Whiteness	OBW	Blizzard	BLI
	Invested in You	INY*	Code Switch	COS
	Overt Racism	OVR*	Subtle Racism	SBR*
	Push Back	PB*	Brush it Off	BIT*
	Isolation	ISO	Subordination	SUB
	Uncomfortable	UCO	Dismissive	DIS*
	Segregated	SEG	Navigate	NAV
	Tolerate	TOL	Awareness	AWA
	Used to Whiteness	UTW	Not Black Enough	NBE*
	Motivation	MOT	Push Back	PB*
	Community	COM	Acceptance	ACP*
	Safe Spaces	SAF	Empower	EMP*
	Choices	CHO	Accountability	ACC
	Connection	CON	Holistic Development	HLD
	Belonging	BEG*	Togetherness	TOG*
	Understanding	UND	Security	SEC*
	Opportunity	OPP*	Confidence	COE
	Creating Spaces	CRE*	Uplift	UPL*
	Home Away from Home	HAH*	Support	SUP*
	Developing & Building Relationships	DBR*	Recognition	REC*
Select Samples from Data Sources	<p>Participant interviews:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I’m the only Black person here, and it just makes it weird. And it makes you feel like you have to prove yourself and work just as hard, so they don’t look at you funny. You know, assume that you’re not a good student.” (Renee) • “The more I’m here, the more I find people that are more like me, people I connect with and it’s starting to feel more like home away from home.” (Marie) • “For me when I come to the meetings it’s like, a release for me throughout the week. I can just be myself, there’s people hyping me up, telling me I can do it! Honestly, when I come back from the meetings, I feel like I can do anything and I feel on track!” (Jada) 			

Spaces for Sisterhood Theme (continued)

- “When I voice my opinion, I shouldn’t be aggressive or, you know, an angry Black woman. Like no! I actually have an opinion, and you’re actually making me feel some kind of way, and if I can’t speak on it... then it’s like, well, why am I here?” (**Y’Lana**)
- “Yeah, navigate and adapt to situations where it’s not favorable for me like instead of talking this way where they expect you to talk that way come and give advice to other people that are going to experience it you learn for yourself and don’t overreact find different resources and take note of what’s going on and instead of causing a scene.” (**Mauri**)
- “So when I think about developing, so again, having this opportunity to come together and encourage, to come together as women of color and help each other and support each other. And depending on where they’re coming from, that might have been something that was frowned upon, or not encouraged, in those respective areas. So being able to develop in that way, and actually understand, you know, sisterhood is important, and what that means and how it’s displayed, especially when you think about the media, it’s a difference.” (**Admin W**)

Documents: University Diversity Initiatives, Diversity Scorecard, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Annual Report, Campus Climate-Summary, Student Multicultural Center Brochure

Observation: Sister Circle General Meeting (Action Plan Activity, Discussion Ice Breaker, Accountability Groups)

Sense of Belonging Theme

Codes	Opportunity	OPP*	Comfort	COF
	Support	SUP*	Pre-Orientation Program	POP*
	Acceptance	ACP*	Resources	RES
	Home Away from Home	HAH*	Security	SEC*
	Togetherness	TOG*		

Select
Samples
from Data
Sources

Participant interviews:

- “The more I’m here, the more I find people that are more like me, people I connect with and it’s starting to feel more like home away from home.” (**Marie**)
- “Well, security. You know, a lot of times we don’t think about security, but when you’re out there in the midst of these people that are different from yourself, you feel like you’re by yourself, and so it helps our students to feel secure. When you feel secure, you feel like you’re not afraid, and you know how to stand up for yourself, and you know what to say, who to talk to, where to go. You have answers! Security gives you answers! Security gives you a foundation that’s unshakable. Security helps you feel like you’re part of something that’s bigger than yourself, and you never have to be alone. Security gives you this way of positive thinking, that things will happen in a good way for you.” (**Admin B**)

Documents: University Diversity Initiatives, Diversity Scorecard, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Annual Report, Campus Climate- Summary, Student Multicultural Center Brochure

Observation: Sister Circle General Meeting (Atmosphere, Action Plan Activity, Discussion Ice Breaker, Accountability Groups)

Intentional Institutional Inclusion Theme

Codes	Intentional Action/Change	INA	Diversity Course Requirement	DCR
	Creating Spaces	CRES	University Stewards	UST*
	Inclusive	INC	Pre-Orientation Program	POP*
	Where do Black Women Go?	WBDWGI	Safe Spaces	SAF*
	Initiative		Sister Circle	SC
	Campus Climate Study	CCS	Improve Academic Experience	IE
	Student Multicultural Center	SMC	Crafted Spaces	CRS*
	Intentional Funding	INF	Sister 2 Sister	S2S
	Different Spectrum	DIFS	Beyond Empathy	BEM
	Priority	PRI	Women's Center	WC
	Institutionalized Priorities of Diversity	IPD	Women of Color Collective (Employee Resource Group)	WCC
Select Samples from Data Sources	<p>Participant interviews:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “So how do we drive change throughout the entire university? A lot of it has to do with the fact that diversity, equity, and inclusion touches every area. It’s not just for the student; part is also for faculty, staff, administrators, you know, and we’re very intentional about how that works. So being on the President’s Cabinet certainly helps a lot. So, where my position is, as part of the cabinet, diversity is discussed, and implementation of diversity goals are always implemented throughout the entire university.” (Admin B) • “I feel like it’ll change the racial climate as we go on. It’s going to get more diverse, and it’ll be more opportunities for students like us. And I feel like they have an environment where they’re trying to be as open and inclusive as they can. So, I feel like that has a lot to do with the progression. It’s not going to stop. I feel like it’s not like they’re battling us as, like, we’re trying to get more inclusive, and they are very inclusive it. So with that, I think that [we] have the racial climate change.” (Mauri) <p>Documents: University Diversity Initiatives, Diversity Scorecard, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Annual Report, Campus Climate- Summary, Multicultural Center Brochure</p> <p>Observation: Sister Circle Meeting</p>			

Campus Agents Theme

Codes	Black Womyn Leaders	BWL	Inspire	INS*
	Interested in You	INY*	Representation	REP*
	Empower	EMP*	University Stewards	UST*
	Self-Valuation	SDV*	Security	SEC*
	Developing & Building Relationships	DBR*		
Select Samples from Data Sources	Participant interviews:			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I feel like I'm represented well here, like we have black women that are in higher positions here. It gives me like that extra push like that drive. Like I can do that or I can do that I see people that do it that look just like me” (ESI) 			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “We always have a few Black girl interns here. And she walked up to me and said, “I’ve never seen that many Black faculty and staff in my life since I’ve been here!” And she was a senior! So just the beauty in that, to see there’s people here in high places that look like you. Imagery is so important.” (Admin A) 			
	Documents: University Diversity Initiatives, Diversity Scorecard, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Annual Report			
	Observation: Sister Circle Mee (Advisor)			